Overview

by David Mathews

Usually I write an overview that summarizes the options the foundation is considering for future research. The subject of this Connections is Kettering’s study of the relationship between the public and the public schools. The findings from past research, which were reported in Is There a Public for Public Schools? are clear enough: too many people have decided the schools aren’t theirs. Now we are investigating what can be done to counter this perception. In this article, I’ll present a new hypothesis that has grown out of recent research. We need to investigate a public-centered, public-building type of public engagement. The foundation welcomes educational organizations and associations as well as civic groups that have a self-interest in experimenting with this form of engagement.

In the last three years, Kettering has looked at the relationship the public had with the first schools, their current relationship, and the relationship people wish they had. Some of the results have been published in Why Public Schools? Whose Public Schools? a book on the role that communities played when public education was in its infancy.

The first schools were often deeply embedded in their communities because many were the product of collective decision making and action. These institutions were authentic, familiar, and organic; in fact, they were the community in another form. As such, they were linked to the social, economic, and political networks that communities turned to when anything important needed to be done.

One of the most striking implications from the newest research at Kettering is that people may no longer see the schools as community institutions. Rather, they consider them to be government agencies or bureaucracies like a district office of the Social Security Administration. Bureaucracies may be helpful, but they are seldom familiar. Schools may be important to a community, but they are not a product of its efforts. They may be listed in the telephone book without being embedded in the local civic infrastructure, which was characteristic of the first schools.

Whether or not schools are actually bureaucracies, they certainly suffer from many of the problems that beset them. As is true of bureaucracies, the complexity, number, and degree of detail in school policies and procedures make them less accessible to the unorganized citizenry than the organized. And, fairly or not, schools, like bureaucracies, are criticized for being mechanistic, rule-bound, and unresponsive. Both institutions face questions about their accountability and legitimacy.

Read the following description of the plight of modern bureaucracies and consider whether the same thing is happening to school systems. Brian Cook, a student of public administration, has observed, “an increasingly vicious circle has emerged in which anxiety about control and accountability … has led to more extensive, more complex controls, which in turn have increased the bureaucratic distance between administrators and the public they are expected to serve. This distance then raises new worries about control and accountability and brings about the introduction of another layer of controls.” Cook goes on to argue that the net result has been just the opposite of what was intended; namely, administrative effectiveness in serving the public has been undermined.
Public schools suffer from another limitation characteristic of bureaucracies, which are good at maintaining the routines and uniformity that promote efficiency but are not as well suited to combating what scholars call “wicked” problems. These are problems that are exceptionally complex in the sense that their nature is obscure, they arise from multiple sources, and they resist technical or professional solutions. (Persistent poverty in times of general prosperity is a typical example.) Consequently, as school systems lose their organic qualities and take on bureaucratic characteristics, they become less able to deal with wicked problems, which are surely implicated in issues like the achievement gap.

Given the similarities between schools and bureaucracies, one objective of public engagement should be to recapture or strengthen the communitylike characteristics of schools and relocate them in broader social, economic, and political networks. But who is capable of doing this, particularly in light of the forces that make schools adopt bureaucratic defenses? Can schools simply ignore all external pressures, from federal and state regulations to the threat of lawsuits in an increasingly litigious society? If relief has to come from the public, as surely some of it must, what is the public that needs to be engaged? Stakeholders? Interest groups? The electorate at large?

Different answers to these questions are evident in the wide variety of efforts by administrators, boards, and civic organizations to forge stronger ties between schools and communities. Motives for these initiatives include crises, such as a failed tax levy, and more fundamental concerns, such as the worry that schools have become too detached from communities and other educational institutions.

Even those who are convinced that communities have nothing to offer the schools except financial support, usually acknowledge that communities can be a source of negative influences on young people. These outside forces can be so powerful, James Traub argues in the New York Times Magazine, that schools alone can’t possibly offset their “trajectories,” which are established long before youngsters arrive in classrooms. Traub believes that communities are important because conditions surrounding schools, not just conditions within schools, have a decisive effect on whether children learn.

Combating negative influences and cultivating positive ones are just one of the reasons that public engagement is on the agenda of many educational and civic organizations. Yet Don Davies, who has long been an advocate of community involvement, worries that the rhetoric of “partnerships” and of drawing on the “whole village” is often just that — rhetoric. Whether or not that is the case, engagement campaigns have markedly different notions of the public they want to involve.

Here is a way of understanding the public that grows out of Kettering research and suggests still another way to go about public engagement. I have called it public-centered engagement.

If the objective of engagement is to position the schools in community life so they can draw on many kinds of support, and if the engagement requires a citizenry having both a sense of responsibility and the power to reach its objectives, then those tasks define “the public” that has to be engaged. This means parents alone aren’t enough. Key leaders aren’t enough. Even the electorate is not enough. A community has to have a citizenry drawn from all its sectors that can make the collective decisions needed to take effective, ongoing civic action.
up the work of citizens, which includes one of the most essential — collective decision making.

Consider the implications of this view of the public for engagement. What has to be engaged is not so much a body of people (parents, business leaders, civic advocates) as a dynamic set of interactions or civic practices. (I’ll elaborate shortly.)

The challenges public-centered engagement has to face don’t come as much from outright opposition as from what appear to be competing strategies that have worthy, but very different, objectives. For instance, educators are attracted to school-centered engagement. They want the community to get behind their institutions and are often frustrated by a seeming lack of public interest in the issues educators like to discuss. Yet what seem to be two disparate frames of reference — one school-centered and the other public-centered — may not be as different as they seem. I remember a conversation with a school board member who had just become a district attorney. His board dutifully invited citizens to meet on issues such as discipline in the classroom. Absent a crisis, however, only a few parents showed up. On the other hand, as a district attorney, he found meetings about juvenile crime would draw overflow crowds. Are classroom discipline and juvenile crime really different issues? Despite differences in their severity and location, they are closely related. So why was the community more attentive to one than the other? Perhaps it had to do with the way the two problems were named. The word “discipline” probably suggested a problem the schools should solve. Consequently, only a few citizens felt obligated to do more than find out what the educators were doing to solve their problem. But when antisocial behavior spread to the sidewalks and people’s homes, it became everyone’s issue.

Citizens, particularly parents, are also distracted by the appeal of engagement based on the principles of consumerism. Schools are treated like TV repair shops, which encourages parents to say, “I brought my children in at 8 A.M., and I want them ‘fixed’ by 3 PM. If they aren’t, it is the educators’ fault.” People don’t necessarily think that being a consumer is the best kind of relationship to have with the schools, yet it works, and some schools seem to encourage it. Consumer-ism, however, invites individual action (often complaints), not collective public action. Parents are more likely to talk about their children than all children. Acting like a shopper may prompt better service for those making a “purchase,” but it doesn’t lead to public ownership and responsibility, nor does it strengthen the practices that make for a democratic public. Furthermore, it redefines the public schools as just another type of utility providing personal services, such as a supply of gas for a fee, paid in the case of schools with tax dollars.

Finally, there are indications in the research that reform legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, may divert attention away from public-centered engagement, even though that is surely unintentional. After all, the legislation grew out of an effort to give the public more control over the schools and, presumably, to create closer ties between schools and the citizenry. The strategy behind the law seems to be to make schools more accountable by publicizing standardized test scores so citizens can judge their performance. Although most people believe in high expectations for children, favor tests, and appreciate having more information about schools, they seem to have a broader notion of what makes for accountability. They may be looking for a relationship with schools that allows them an actual account of what is happening in classrooms — a face-to-face description that is responsive to all they want in the education of children, including qualities of mind and traits of character, as well as levels of academic performance.

Preliminary Kettering research also suggests that, deep down, citizens know they and their communities are accountable for providing a good education....
whether they are “with” the schools in meeting educators’ demands for increased support. This attitude obviously complicates the work of public engagement.

The first and primary challenge in the kind of engagement I am proposing is public-building. People have to engage one another as citizens of a community before there can be a public capable of engaging the schools. Individuals form a public by practicing the practices that allow them to make collective decisions, which are the basis for collective action. These practices are the civic dynamics I mentioned earlier. Public-making activities include:

- naming problems in community terms (rather than in professional or technical terms);
- framing issues for collective decision making;
- deliberating as a public to decide on a course of action;
- generating the political will to undertake a range of civic actions; and
- developing a habit of shared reflection to keep up the momentum needed to deal with the wicked problems.

These aren’t techniques to be used on the citizens of a community; they are practices to be used by citizens. Each is only one component of public work, and they must be done together to have any impact.

There isn’t anything extraordinary about these practices. Nearly every day, an individual or organization in a community issues a statement saying, “the problem we are dealing with is ________.” Fill in the blank. That is naming. Someone else says, “we can either do ‘x’ or ‘y.'” That is creating a framework for decision making. Then some group makes a decision or refuses to make a decision (which is actually a decision by default). The crucial question is, who does all of these things? How much are citizens involved? The challenge is to make the naming, framing, deciding, and all the practices public. And that is what makes public engagement possible.

Public-centered engagement is not only possible but also relatively simple to begin. Recall the relative lack of community interest in a classroom issue like discipline as compared to interest in a communitywide problem like juvenile violence. Building a responsible public can start merely by renaming problems traditionally left for the schools to solve so that they are seen in their true light as community problems. This starts, as well, to reconnect schools and communities. If problems like school discipline are rooted in neighborhoods, then obviously citizens have to join forces and act. Schools can’t be expected to act alone.

What about the role of educators in public-making practices? How do they engage a dynamic set of activities? Brian Cook, the scholar I mentioned earlier, has a suggestion for public administrators that might be applicable to superintendents, principals, and teachers. He urges public administrators to enter public deliberations, not just on issues they are concerned about, but on issues the public at large worries about.

Educators might be well served by starting with issues that are community-based but school-related.
Young people who grow up at risk from social pathologies is one. Replacing lost jobs and devising a new formula for economic development is another. These are only two of many topics that beg for serious public deliberation because they affect nearly all segments of the population, either directly or indirectly. And while not solely classroom issues, most have implications for educating institutions.

Deliberation is a natural act and doesn’t require any special expertise. People deliberate over personal issues all the time, usually with friends, family, and those whose opinions they respect. Public deliberation expands the number and character of the participation but doesn’t change the process. Public deliberation is making collective choices about the best way to respond to these common problems. It is neither a general discussion nor a debate. It is the work of weighing the costs and benefits of major options for action, which is usually more than two. A town meeting or forum may focus the deliberations, but only to model the choice work. The bulk of the careful weighing has to go on wherever citizens gather — from local diners to civic clubs. The results come in over time from multiple sources. Total agreement on one specific action is rare not only because opinions vary, but also because there is seldom one action that will solve a complex problem. What can emerge is a sense of direction and the identification of common purposes. A community can learn what its citizens will and won’t do to solve a problem. Most important of all, a more reflective and shared judgment emerges from first opinions. Something like a public voice, in contrast to a cacophony of particular special interest pleadings, becomes audible.

Even though I believe there are advantages to starting deliberations with community issues, I would not rule out professional topics. The American Bar Association (ABA) has responded to criticisms of the legal profession’s role in the judicial system by preparing an issue book for public deliberations. Having previously attempted to “inform” the citizenry through a public relations campaign intended to create a better image of the profession, the ABA decided to go directly to the public. Their issue book presents a range of options for improving the judicial system, including some options that I imagine appeal more to nonlawyers than lawyers. It is quite a remarkable, even courageous, strategy. There are other examples. The Catholic community has sponsored forums on abortions using a National Issues Forums guide. It, too, presented options other than the ones the Church favored. Perhaps, in time, one of the professional associations in public education will prepare issue books to engage some of the criticisms directed at educators.

I don’t want to give the impression that I think public deliberation is some kind of cure-all for professions or communities. Its benefits, like those of going to a gym, only come in time. And there isn’t any guarantee that the public will come to the “right” conclusion. Furthermore, collective decision making is just one of the practices in public work. At best, it enlarges the understanding of the nature of a problem, which can draw on more than the “usual suspects” to take the actions that should follow deliberation.

The case for building engagement around public deliberation is that collective decision making is at the heart of democratic politics. It helps create the public, and it puts the public back into the public’s business.
While studying rural schools, Kettering researchers came upon one man who said, “We are an ‘us’ in Amesville … everything we do is tied to the school system.” He spoke of the local schools with the pride of ownership people felt when schools were built with hand-hewn boards by neighbors who had done the felling of the trees for the boards. His voice revealed the confidence that comes from hands-on involvement in a close-knit community.

Far too commonly today, however, communities do not attach this sense of pride to their schools. Kettering sees this loss of pride as important, and asks why it has occurred. What intervening factors have weakened the historic relationship between the public and the public schools?

In Kettering’s view, schools, being integral parts of the community, reflect the character of the community: that is, the nature of local relationships and values. Further, in any given community the relationship between citizens and their schools reflects a broader circumstance. That relationship is symptomatic of the connections existing between the community and all the institutions that serve it.

In Kettering research, one question we ask people is whether they would describe the local school to a visitor as “their” school or “the” school? The response provides a shortcut answer to whether the community feels it owns its schools. What we hear back is a mixture of pride and exasperation, and not always where those responses might be expected.

One strong piece of the public’s response is, increasingly, people view their relationship to the schools in “consumer” terms. This was the finding, for instance, of a 1999 study by Doble Research Associates.

Although “consumer” represents a variety of viewpoints, the term has become a standard in our research. Consumers make demands of institutions and expect services in return. They have no role to play other than oversight of the transaction. Part of the reason members of the community adopt this perspective may be that they have difficulty imagining any other way of relating. Some people told researchers that schools seem to expect them to play that role; many felt confined by it. Others felt comfortable as consumers, stating it was the school’s responsibility to educate and theirs to judge the success of the final product.

We need to know more about how citizens view, and talk about, the relationships they currently have with the public schools, and have asked Paul Werth Associates to interview residents of two large cities about the nature of their interactions with the public schools. The research had two general lines of questions. The first explored the roles of citizens and the community as actors in education. Do people see ways that they themselves, and their community collectively, could be resources to complement the schools in education? The second explored how people see the roles (if any) of the schools as resources in dealing with community issues that spill over into the schools. Are there issues that communities struggle with, where people see the public schools as a potential resource? How might schools be effectively linked to community efforts to deal with such problems?

The cities reflected markedly different attitudes. In one, residents described a shared sense of responsibility for educating youth, including recognition...
Eight of community issues that affect the schools. In the other, people’s focus was narrower: they spoke mainly of being advocates for their own children. This second group anticipated no further connection between themselves and local schools, once their own children had graduated. The researchers noted another revealing difference. While the latter city is seen as having “better” schools by conventional measures, people interviewed in the first city were more content with their community’s education efforts and less inclined to focus blame on the schools.

Some educators have taken these findings as support for exploring how “public engagement” can be a challenge for the whole community rather than solely for the schools to meet. More educators have come to recognize that the success of their work depends on the active support of parents and other community actors. They note that the social motivation for learning — the norms and expectations for student performance supporting or undermining the actions of the schools — are shaped and enforced outside the schools. Community-based civic and business institutions can also provide experiences and context for learning, and can thus be resources to complement school efforts. To the extent complementary support in the community is absent, the efforts of professionals in schools will be weakened. Even worse, where communities have turned their resources against the schools, the efforts of professionals can be thwarted. Finally, there is the recognition that schools are increasingly buffeted by community-based problems, but these problems spill over into the schools — problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, violent crime, and other forms of antisocial behavior. The symptoms show up in the schools, but are located and need to be dealt with in the communities. Thus Charles Irish, who as a superintendent used public processes to engage citizens in decision making, has said, “Our job as a school district is to work to re-create the connection. If we don’t, we’re going to lose our public.”

There are, however, barriers to improved engagement. Education professionals often speak in favor of engaging the public, but do not act accordingly. In a 2001 survey by Public Agenda, Just Waiting to Be Asked? 83 percent of super-
intendents said public engagement should involve more than open houses and similar volunteer activities for the schools. Yet, 62 percent of those superintendents reported that their most recent meeting with community members had been held to explain and enlist support for just such school initiatives. Thus, for many school level professionals, engagement remains a one-way street: the public exists to be recruited to assist on tasks and agendas set by the schools.

Current legislation also presents challenges to improving the relationship between the public and the public schools. In a report to Kettering entitled “No Community Left Behind?” (May 2003) the regional educational lab known as McREL looked at the potential impact of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) on school-community relationships. NCLB includes provisions requiring parental and community involvement in the schools, and could be an opportunity to increase meaningful dialogues about community purposes of and aspirations for local schools. Those who seek to improve the relationship may want to begin by openly sorting out a community interpretation of meaningful involvement.

McREL has observed that community organizing is increasingly the method chosen for public engagement with the schools. A similar finding was made by researchers from the Collaborative Communications Group in a report for Kettering, New Relationships with Schools: Organizations That Build Community By Connecting With Schools (March 2003). According to the report, community organizing is particularly likely to be undertaken in “disinvested communities where previous efforts have not served residents well.” The research asked: What new relationships with schools are created by organizations and their constituents as they go about the work of improving their communities?

The initial report on community organizing efforts mapped the field and made observations, but further work is needed to understand the impact of community organizing on democratic practices. According to McREL, people trained in organizing are “building the skills and confidence to take on school challenges without waiting to be asked or acting within proscribed forms.” Such organizing has the potential not only to influence schools, but to increase the capacity of individuals to act effectively in concert with others, and thus create or support democratic practices within communities. And those may be the first steps toward building a public for public schools.

Differently envisioned, public engagement could be public-building. A challenge for us now is to understand how communities can themselves develop the ability to examine their own disconnection between the public and the public schools. Such experiments may reveal possibilities for new means of engagement. How do communities come to a shared understanding of how they relate as a community? How might this insight affect people’s sense of themselves as responsible actors for education?

We want to learn how communities can come to recognize their interdependence in educating young people. Every community would like to be able to say, “WE are an US.” Now we look to you to help us imagine: What would be a useful way to begin the dialogue and who might we work with to learn more?

Connie Gabagan is a program associate at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached by E-mail at gabagan@kettering.org.
From Partners to Owners

by Michael Briand

Throughout America, public schools face challenges. Many find it difficult to meet these challenges on their own; they need help from people outside the school system or the school. For example, to fulfill today’s higher expectations for teacher performance and student achievement, schools are looking to parents, businesses, and community organizations to provide forms of support and assistance that the schools alone can’t supply. Public education has entered the age of partnerships.

The idea of a “partner” is a familiar one. There are business partners, partners in law firms and medical practices, and partners in a marriage. The notion of a partnership seems straightforward. Within public education, however, partnership is still a new concept. Not surprisingly, school partnerships currently take a variety of forms.

Some partnerships appear more promising than others in helping schools meet the challenges confronting them. Only one, though, offers the potential to solve what might be the toughest problem confronting public schools today: the widespread feeling among ordinary citizens that they no longer “own” the schools that once belonged to them.

“What works for me is being on a first-name basis with teachers.” That’s how one parent recently characterized the kind of relationship she wants to have with her local schools. Most parents have always valued this kind of relationship, of course; it is one way they can be sure teachers are attending to their children’s needs. Many parents want a school environment, or “culture,” that permits and encourages them to develop informal, personal relationships with school staff. That’s why many say the ideal relationship is one in which “parents are welcomed into the schools, not seen as unwelcome visitors,” and it’s why they describe that relationship using words like “openness,” “access,” and “communication.”

Some parents today are making it clear, however, that the role schools have traditionally afforded them no longer suffices for effective involvement. It’s not enough to attend parent-teacher conferences, supervise homework, serve on committees, join the PTA, help out in the classroom, raise extra money for school activities, and so on. For these parents, effective involvement means letting parents come into the schools to see what the teachers do and how the school operates. As one parent remarked, education “works better if there is a partnership relationship where you can have input.”

It’s not just parents, moreover, who want the schools to welcome input from noneducators. Other community members believe they have a responsibility to work with the schools. As one community advocate put it, “schools [should] not be bureaucratic operations, but relational operations. The focus [should] be … thinking about [the] school as a series of relationships working towards a common goal of helping children.”

“If we’ve got a school that’s not doing well, let’s … get in there and diagnose the problem.” This sentiment, expressed by a man in Atlanta, captures the animating spirit of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), passed by Congress in 2001. Inspired by the laudable goal of enabling all children to meet high academic standards, the new law requires that states develop academic and performance standards and that most students undergo annual standardized testing; and schools be held accountable in various ways. Schools must make adequate progress toward academic performance goals, must ensure all teachers are highly qualified, and must empower parents by requiring school districts to report annual student test data and other important school information. If the first form of school partnership can be described as “relational,” this form might be called “informational.”

The NCLB assumes that the goal of educating all young people to high standards is the job chiefly of educators. But it places new emphasis on the role of parents, who have a right (though not an
obligation) to make sure their children’s needs are being properly addressed. It stresses “parent involvement,” defined as “the participation of parents in … meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities, including ensuring that … parents are full partners in their child’s education and are included, as appropriate, in decision making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child.” All schools receiving federal funds must “involve parents, in an organized, ongoing, and timely way” in the “joint development” of both schoolwide improvement and parental involvement policies. Specifically, every school must develop (with parental input) a “school-parent compact” explaining how parents, school staff, and students “will share the responsibility for improved student academic achievement.”

The NCLB aims at giving parents more leverage over the professionals who run their children’s schools. In this respect, it makes common cause with parents and community members who believe that existing forms of involvement in school affairs don’t enable noneducators to have a real impact on school policies and practices. Too often, this group argues, people get “co-opted by schools, being told what issues they should work on.” In their view, this gets things the wrong way around — the schools should take their direction from the community. For these individuals, the paramount question is, Who possesses authority to establish school policies and practices? They want more than accountability — they want control.

“The public schools need to be improved. Where would society be if we didn’t have a good, strong public school system?” “We have to understand that our whole [community’s] well-being depends, in the long run, on the schools.” These are quotes from two individuals whose relationship to the schools was, in a recent study, characterized as “partners.” “Partners” are people who are active in the schools. Some undertake traditional tasks, like raising funds. Others act as “para-educators” assisting teachers in the classroom (for example, by helping children with their reading). Most are parents of school-age children; some aren’t — for example, a retired police officer who uses the school gym for a “midnight basketball” program to give teenagers something to do late on weekend nights. Partners establish connections, build relationships, and form networks throughout their community. They often see themselves as “bridge-builders” who are trying to link different groups in the community with the schools. They also describe themselves as communicators who deal in a constructive manner with both school officials and members of their community.

What distinguishes partners, however, is their grasp that the schools are part of the community. For partners, the well-being of the community and the well-being of the schools are inseparable. They see that, in striving to educate young people, the schools must solve problems and meet needs that are the community’s as much as they are the school’s. Consequently, they want to make sure the purposes and goals of the schools are in line with the community’s interests. They believe it’s the responsibility of the whole community, not just school professionals, to educate young people. And they’re convinced that everyone has something to contribute to this task. They feel strongly that, when it comes to education, “we’re all in this together.”
Which of these three types of school partnerships is likely to prove most effective in helping schools meet the challenges they face today? In particular, which has the most potential for solving what may be the knottiest problem of all: how to overcome the dissatisfaction that stems from the widespread sense that the schools no longer belong to ordinary people?

The first two approaches — the “relational” and the “informational” — have the merit of recognizing that parents play a unique and indispensable role in their children’s academic success, and hence ought to be involved deeply in decisions concerning their children’s education. But these forms of partnership also have weaknesses. The relational approach provides little leverage for parents who find that informal, personal relationships with their children’s teachers don’t yield the results they seek. Similarly, the informational approach, as embodied in the No Child Left Behind Act, acknowledges the right of parents to participate (at least nominally) in school decision making, but gives them no real authority or power. Worse, attempts by noneducators to join in decision making may prompt school officials to “circle the wagons” and to deflect or stonewall what they perceive as intrusions. If this happens, then noneducators may find themselves with even less influence than they enjoyed previously.

Neither of the first two approaches emphasizes the responsibilities of nonparents or the contributions they can make to the education of young people. The third form of partnership — what might be dubbed the “community responsibility” model — avoids this error. Like the relational and informational approaches, however, it does nothing to enhance the influence of noneducators with respect to determining school policies and practices. (“Partners” are disinclined to question or impinge upon the authority of education professionals; more commonly, they think it appropriate to offer support.

Perhaps more important, the community responsibility form shares a problem with the other two models. It does not consider that people may not want either a personal relationship with school personnel or the information policymakers think will enable them to reassert influence over the schools. Maybe what people really want is reassurance. Maybe what they’re looking for is some way to understand what the schools do and why they do it, so they can judge for themselves whether the goals and methods of the schools are in line with their own needs, values, and priorities.

For this reason, one other form of relationship ought to be considered, though it is a form more clearly associated with the country’s past than with its present. In his study of the first community schools in southwestern Alabama, David Mathews offers examples of communities that didn’t have to figure out what kind of partnership they should have with their schools, for the simple reason that a school was part of the community, not something distinct from it. As Mathews observes,

People … making choices that set the directions for long-term tasks like educating young people … suggests a shared sense of responsibility or ownership…. Schools enjoyed broad support in communities because they were perceived as extensions of the communities; they were the public organized to make learning available.

In early nineteenth-century America, when the first public schools were being founded, there was no “disconnect” between communities and their schools. There was no question about who “owned” them. There was no broken relationship between the community and the schools — indeed, there was no “relationship” at all, in the sense we employ that word today. Schools were fully integrated with the communities they served. Education of the young was a community responsibility. Authority, too, rested with the community: schools were created, and subsequently directed, by members of the community working together. The partnership that existed was a partnership among citizens, among individual members of the community. As Mathews aptly puts it, schools were “the public organized to make learning available.”

If communities today do not approach public education in the manner of early American communities, how might they once again become “the public organized to make learning available”? Perhaps the way to begin bringing the schools back into the community is not by attempting to bring the community and the schools into partnership, but by members of the community forming a partnership with each other.
How might a partnership among the members of a community be forged? In brief, by people deliberating together. Citizen deliberation in community forums opens lines of communication, enabling citizens to share perceptions and concerns with others with whom they normally have little contact. Such forums build mutual understanding, respect, and trust, thereby establishing new connections or strengthening fragile ones. Through deliberation, the members of a community can build a partnership among themselves that will enable them to share responsibility and authority for the education of their young people.

The place to begin deliberating is not in the schools but in the community. And deliberation should not be about the schools but about education. That is how public education was created, and it is how it must be reconceived and rebuilt. If people can deliberate together, they will find that the schools have become their schools once again. And when the schools belong to the public once more, that public will find ways to solve the problems and meet the challenges confronting their schools today.

Michael Briand is an associate of the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached by E-mail at IDDD@att.net.

Accountability, National Standards, and the Public

by Phillip D. Lurie

One of the three central assumptions that frame Kettering Foundation research is that democracies "need institutions that enjoy the confidence of citizens and serve to strengthen public life." (Kettering Foundation Overview, July 2001, p. 4) Institutions support the practices that create publics around shared concerns, as they are supported by complementary public acting. Too often, the connection between the public and the institutions intended to serve it is weak. Thus, a focal point for Kettering Foundation research has been the political disconnect between citizens, their governments, and the nongovernmental institutions charged to serve the public. Indeed, all Kettering Foundation program areas give critical attention to the lack of alignment of citizen and institutional practice. While the analytical concept of "the public" and theories of "the disconnect" are not widely shared in popular discourse, one symptom — the widespread discontent with institutions — is generally recognized. When discontented with institutions, Americans have often sought their reform. Commonly, reform efforts seek passage of legislation that will discipline the institution in question. Such reform movements have been rooted in the belief that if the operations of the institution in question could be made more efficient — if performance could be demonstrably enhanced — public support would follow. Such thinking has been behind calls for "reinventing government" and other administrative bodies, efforts that emphasize performance measurement and promise accountability as the cornerstone of the movement. Similar efforts have emerged recently in journalism, philanthropy, and higher education.
Such thinking is also behind recent efforts to reform public schools. Even prior to the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the discussion among education professionals and journalists had long been dominated by the challenge of instituting standards as a device for promoting and demonstrating accountability. The challenge educators and others see is to develop objective, geographically comparable measures that provide the means to hold educators accountable for results. The federal legislation has brought that perspective to the head of the class.

Kettering Foundation research suggests two reasons for concern about framing the challenge in that manner. The first stems from the recognition that education is one of a number of deeply rooted challenges that do not lend themselves to purely technical solutions. As with other systemic political challenges, education is a field in which both the definition of the problem and the nature of the response are contestable and based on judgment. In the absence of a citizenry engaged around the challenge of education, public schools are left to grapple with the demands of distinct, competing interest groups. Accountability measures ignore the need for a shared sense of direction for education. When there is no coherent public, there is no meaningful way to be accountable to the public. In that case, the very practices that are intended to address the dissatisfaction may contribute to widening the disconnect.

The second reason for concern stems from the implications the standards have on the identity of the political actors to be held accountable. What are the implications for the ways of relating among citizens, various community organizations, and the public schools as they grapple with the challenge of education? As generally interpreted, the citizenry, communities, and even parents (or students) are regarded as political actors only as sources of pressure on the schools. Thus the perspective of education as consumer good, singularly produced by the schools, is reinforced and further institutionalized. That may increase the difficulty for those who seek ways to restore a sense of democratic ownership of education.

It is important to note, however, that Kettering’s research has shown “accountability” to have a different meaning to different citizens and audiences. As to this issue, David Mathews notes in his Overview, citizens often have a broader definition of accountability — one that is not only based on information, but on relationships as well. In fact, this distinction has been highlighted in three recent reports to the foundation.

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), for example, reported in “No Community Left Behind?” that, “Community and parent advocates as well as parents themselves worried that schools’ current focus on high-stakes testing and accountability may prevent the development of more effective parent and community engagement.” In short, the heightened emphasis on standard-
ized testing leaves many parents feeling shut out of the education process. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, signed into law by President Bush on January 8, 2002, set new guidelines for education reform based on four principles: increased accountability; choices for parents and students; flexibility for states, districts and schools; and advocacy of proven education methods. Much emphasis has, therefore, been placed on standardized testing, voucher and charter school programs, and professionalized, rigid teaching methods. Some critics of this law believe the changes will encourage parents and schools to engage in a consumer-based relationship, rather than one based on mutual reinforcement. While NCLB does contain provisions for parental involvement, findings from reports such as McREL’s underscore these concerns. The reasoning behind this stems mostly from concerns about how the tests are produced, and how the testing process is far removed from the community.

This last concern was especially relevant in a report by Arlie Woodrum, “State-Mandated Testing and Cultural Resistance in Appalachian Schools: Competing Values and Expectations.” There is a dichotomous relationship between working-class Appalachians and non-Appalachians with respect to the issue of standardized testing. Woodrum writes, “Current accountability measures, while embraced by middle-class, non-Appalachian families and teachers, are viewed by poor Appalachian families as yet another example of the state asserting its own values and power over them.” This is a particularly poignant problem in rural areas, such as Appalachia, because the school is one of the few public spaces in which a community can gather. A second report furthers this concern. Doble Research Associates, in “Who Is Accountable for Education? Overview of Observations from Two Focus Groups in Rural Southeastern Ohio,” also describes the feelings of Appalachians. The report underscores what was reported earlier; namely, that accountability is a local issue that should be engaged in a joint effort by educators and community members.

The Kettering Foundation has hypothesized that to move from the consumer-based viewpoint to one that focuses on the community (or the relational), strategies for public engagement should center on the community rather than on the school. In Making the Schools Public Again, David Mathews wrote, “Reframing school-related issues to show their roots in the community so civic action can be directed at underlying problems is reinforcing.” That is, an engaged citizenry, one that is based in and reflects the community, can move beyond mere public engagement (as specified by NCLB) toward public-building.

This suggests that research must continue in the following areas: The first is to continue to focus on the reaction of communities to the standards movement. This will involve examining citizens’ notions of accountability, how the standards movement affects citizens’ relationship with their schools, as well as how that relationship has been transformed now that NCLB is beginning to have local effects. This will be particularly poignant when large numbers of schools become classified as poor performers, triggering a series of federally proscribed actions.

The second is to recognize that the movement in education is simply a version of the generic challenge of institutional accountability in public life. Research into schools should, therefore, be brought together with research from the other Kettering Foundation areas that define the challenge as one of restoring a sense of institutional legitimacy through practices that build and serve the public interest. The goal is to change the way the dialogue is framed so as to bring public ownership/self-rule back into the story.

Collaborative Communications Group wrote in a September 2002 report, “The community is often cast as having an important role in holding schools accountable. Less evident are specific roles for parents and community members around shared decision making and leadership within these accountability systems … the issue of accountability is most often framed as a policy — and not a public — issue.” These sentiments, in fact each specific thought, provide a helpful outline for future research in this area. If the foundation can examine the role of community in accountability, accountability in relational terms, and the importance of public-building strategies, then the foundation will have a solid base with which to address these “wicked problems” regarding public schools.
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.

Where the Public Stands on Standards-based Education

by Bryan Goodwin

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 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 policymakers, 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 policymakers 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.”

Bryan Goodwin is director of communications at McREL. He can be reached at bgoodwin@mcrel.org.

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 online.
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.

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.
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 (CASC) 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 CASC’s efforts in other districts to support communitywide engagement of issues, asked for its assistance. With guidance from CASC 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 school 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...
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.

Randall Nielsen is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at nielsen@kettering.org.
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 motivations 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. 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.

Kris Kurtenbach is the president of the Collaborative Communications Group. He can be reached by E-mail at kurtenbach@publicengagement.com.
Twenty-five

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 students is the key to long-term economic and social improvement for our nation.” The partnership has already worked with the public to improve the quality of education. Their Web site (http://www.mcrel.org) states: “Our mission is to make a difference in the quality of education for all students by providing leadership and service in the research, development, and dissemination of new knowledge about effective teaching and learning.”
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.
In 1996, the Holmes Group board of directors took a rare step for an organization of educators: it voted itself out of existence. This action was in response to a comprehensive assessment of ten years of work produced by the Holmes Group, later published as The Rise and Stall of Teacher Education Reform (Fullan, et al, 1998).

That assessment had reached a blunt conclusion. It reported that of the nearly one hundred prestigious universities that committed themselves to the ambitious teacher education reform agenda of the Holmes Partnership, only a handful had made real progress. All participating universities had agreed with Holmes' assertion that the reform of teacher education was crucial to meeting the challenges of the A Nation at Risk report that assessed the state of U.S. public education in 1983. Most schools of education had, however, found it nearly impossible to reform their own operations. The common denominator among those universities that had shown some success was the establishment of serious partnerships with local school districts, teacher associations, and community organizations.

This finding was key to reestablishing the Holmes Group as the Holmes Partnership. The board that oversaw the transition committed itself to the idea that true reform in teacher education required schools of education to partner with local school districts, creating initiatives that combined change in teacher education with teacher professional development in school settings that focused on promoting student achievement.

By 2000, the 75 or so Holmes Partnership local partnerships faced unanticipated challenges. Some were internal to university culture; for example, the difficulty of making fundamental changes to faculty work expectations and to the reward structures that valued traditional academic scholarship above practical engagement in schools. Further, Holmes did not foresee that the fairly frequent leadership turnover in both universities and public schools would make it difficult to sustain long-term reforms.

The most significant challenges, however, were changes in educational policy-making and funding. The first was a general shift from local to state control. As school districts in the 1990s were unable to raise the necessary funds from local property taxes, the share of funds coming from the state rose. Increased state funding brought with it the institution of state accountability systems relying on state curriculum standards and student testing. Another change was a simultaneous worsening teacher shortage, especially in the South and West. Faced with that shortage, states began to create alternative paths to teacher certification. In many states, university teacher educators faced a new reality: they no longer held the exclusive franchise for educating teachers. The alternative programs, promising “fewer barriers” to becoming a teacher, were less time consuming and less expensive than traditional ones.

President Bush’s signing of The No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 made a federal policy agenda of what had been state efforts to reshape the face of American public education using.
Twenty-eight standards and accountability tools. This law acknowledged, some would say blessed, the desires of many conservative policymakers to deregulate, privatize, and commercialize teacher training. These policymakers believed that the solution to failing schools was competition and choice. The same ideas that drove charter-school and voucher initiatives were being applied to teachers and teacher education. If colleges and schools of education were not willing or able to produce the quantity and kinds of teachers schools needed, then others ought to be allowed to do so.

Within a few years, the landscape for teacher education has changed radically. An agenda for teacher professionalism that had been developing steadily in the 1990s has been sidelined politically. Commonly, teacher educators had modeled professional work in teaching along the lines successfully employed by medicine and law in the early twentieth century. They strove to ally the profession with scientific knowledge being produced by the universities, create professional bodies to set professional standards for licensure and professional education, and seek societal and policy jurisdiction for controlling professional practice.

This internal control strategy lost its potency in recent years as free market conservatives have created alternative goals, alternative routes, and alternative policies in education and teacher training. The public legitimacy and social jurisdiction sought by professional educators has not been attained; rather, in many ways it has been undone by the “end run” of alternative conceptions. Even the very ideal of teacher work has been reconstructed by some influential policymakers, who argue teaching is not a learned profession relying on expert judgment but a skilled occupation driven by technique and management.

When the Holmes Group reconstituted itself as the Holmes Partnership in 1996, it was more than merely a change in name. It signified a change in philosophy. The organization’s members acknowledged that change across the system cannot be levied by the institutions of higher education alone, but must involve a partnership among all of the stakeholders including K-12 teachers, K-12 administrators, and teacher organization leaders. Beginning in 2002, the cadre of stakeholders broadened further to include policymakers at the local, state, and national levels.

In the short time since, it has become evident to Holmes that partnering with policymakers was not an effective solution. The implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act undermined many of the efforts of the Holmes Partnership and other similar reform networks by opening the door for initiatives that threaten both quality teacher education and the profession of teaching. As a result, the Holmes Partnership board of directors, led by the current President Robert Yinger, embarked on an innovative campaign to transform the organization, once again broadening the concept of partnership by engaging the public. This, by engaging the public through a deliberative process, will create a different role for the organization and new kinds of relationships among its members. The issue at hand is one of building trust. By engaging the public and building a relationship around the issue of education, the public will be more likely to delegate the responsibility of formal education to those who have the expertise in the field. Leading this initiative, the Holmes Partnership will set an example of a new way of partnering for education reform and renewal. The organization leaders will introduce the concept of creating a public by going outside the education establishment and, in doing so, creating a new social contract.

Robert Yinger is president of the Holmes Partnership. Amanda Nolen is chief operating officer of the Holmes Partnership. She can be reached by E-mail at Amanda_Nolen@baylor.edu.
This is an interesting and very readable book that utilizes some of the core language and ideas of the Kettering Foundation with respect to framing issues, community engagement, and the relationship between schools and the public.

Kathy Gardner Chadwick is the chair of Business and Economics at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. Interestingly, although her book is proffered as a practical guide for educators, she does not have an education background. Her interest in community engagement is rooted in her background in marketing and her passion for education. Actively involved in her own community’s public schools, she believes that “community engagement can address many of the challenges facing today’s educators as they work to help students achieve at a higher level.” Chadwick’s book is written from the perspective of an informed, concerned parent and member of the public. She therefore has a vested interest in creating public conversations that reflect the concerns various constituent groups within a community have on questions of school improvement.

Her book juxtaposes the increasing impact of poverty, homelessness, violence, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy on public schools with the increasing federal, state, and local mandates for greater accountability from those schools. She connects the above-mentioned social problems to diminished parental and community involvement with schools in particular and with the community at large. She utilizes the work of Robert Putnam, Joyce Epstein, and Benjamin Barber and others to construct a conceptual framework for Americans as “less engaged with their public institutions than they were 50 years ago.” Contemporary society, she argues, is marked by a malaise rooted in a lack of civic-mindedness. She presents the question: “Could this disengaged public become a driving force in creating a brighter future for public schools?” The book draws from a broad and deep range of current educational and research literature to support initiatives and strategies for engaging the community on issues often wrongly considered germane to the schools alone.

Chadwick defines community engagement as an activity marked by collaboration and struggle: process rather than product. Her heuristic use of Himmelman’s (1994) continuum of “Networking, Coordinating, Cooperating, and Collaborating” is effective and helpful in critically underscoring that community engagement “involves much more than the traditional one-way flow from schools to the public.” Through that continuum, Chadwick clarifies things for the reader before moving on to the other components of community engagement, such as identifying constituent groups; developing varied perspectives of those constituent groups; and outlining strategies for involvement and action.

I find it perplexing that, given Chadwick’s concern with school improvement through community engagement, she focuses so strongly on schools as the dominant setting. For example, Chadwick acknowledges that “K-12 school administrators, school board members, and teachers are the primary audience for this book, but community leaders and citizens who are interested [my emphasis] in improving student achievement through community engagement will also find the book to be useful.” This creates the impression, pervasive in the book, that if schools get it right, the community can
This book takes a step forward in academic thought about polling. The authors deepen our understanding of how people respond to survey questions and introduce a useful vocabulary about people’s thinking.

Uncertainty, Ambivalence, and Equivocation

Pollsters have long observed wildly unpredictable or “volatile” answers to given questions about political issues, answers that should presumably be fairly consistent among groups of people with similar interests and values. Alvarez and Brehm review existing explanations for “the apparent muddle-headedness of American opinion.” Prominent scholars have regarded volatility in survey responses as a symptom of citizen ignorance, a tendency to give “top-of-the-head” random responses. This view assumes that if citizens had more information, they would give more predictable, consistent responses.

Alvarez and Brehm treat volatility as a factor to be explained rather than a problem with citizens’ competence, and they offer three explanations. The first, uncertainty, does indeed fit with what recent theory expects: here, more information does help translate values into policy choices. But the book offers alternative explanations for volatile survey responses. One is that such volatility may reflect conflicting core values. Alvarez and Brehm call this ambivalence, which means strong forces pulling in opposite directions, not apathy. The concept evokes the “tensions between things held valuable” in Kettering Foundation literature. Another alternative, equivocation (“speaking with two voices”), occurs when people see no conflict between multiple values and arrive at issue opinions with lower volatility, even when those values seem logically contradictory. Equivocation can make it difficult to describe the path from values to issue choices, since the relationship is complex.

Ambivalence is the most interesting of these conditions, since more information about an issue may actually increase volatility by revealing the relevance of conflicting values. For example, citizens take predictable positions for and against legal abortion when rape or the health of the mother are justifications. But opinion about legal abortion for “any reason” is much more volatile, especially for the substantial group who hold conflicting religious and feminist values relevant to the abortion issue. Under ambivalence, additional information increases rather than lessens the tension, as more educated respondents have less consistent opinions on legalizing abortion for any reason.

Hard Choices, Easy Answers
by R. Michael Alvarez and John Brehm
Princeton University Press, 2002
069109635X

This book takes a step forward in academic thought about polling. The authors deepen our understanding of how people respond to survey questions and introduce a useful vocabulary about people’s thinking.

Thirty

become the persuaded populace. As David Mathews (1996) points out in *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* treating the community as audience is at odds with what constitutes an “engaged public.” By focusing on the schools, Chadwick makes it too easy to fall into the trap of assuming a quid pro quo relationship with the public. Creating solutions that both communities and schools are able to support depends on a public conversation guided by the question and not the answer. As Mathews (1996) notes, “participants must avoid the temptation to rush to answers and action before an adequate foundation of trust and common understanding is in place.” The schools should not be looked to for answers. The communities should not be looked to for answers. What must be pursued are common understandings between the two. If we do not endeavor to create such an understanding, communities and schools will continue to become increasingly disconnected from each other and from the students whose lives and learning are at stake.

— Marian Glancy
The book complements the idea, proposed by former Kettering Foundation board member Daniel Yankelovich, that public opinion moves through stages. Yankelovich points out that “vehemence does not mean settled views” (Fortune magazine interview, October 5, 1992). He describes a torturous seven-stage evolution that proceeds from initial awareness through wishful thinking, to grappling with pros and cons, to intellectual positions and finally to responsible moral judgment. Reflecting Alvarez and Brehm’s categories, Yankelovich’s stages might be describing movement from uncertainty (little awareness) through equivocation (wishing away tensions) to ambivalence (grappling with pros and cons) to a real public judgment.

**Implications for representation and deliberation**

One of Alvarez and Brehm’s central concerns is that volatility makes it difficult for political representatives to interpret the thinking of their constituents. Because volatility is not random, it is not reasonable to assume that a simple figure describes the average position of individual citizens. So a member of Congress cannot reliably infer that “55 percent support for option X” translates into real support for that option unless the relative volatility of that percentage is also known. Worse, changes in total figures over time (“support for option X dropped from 55 percent to 42 percent”) are not necessarily linked with the underlying patterns of volatility; what looks like uncertainty in the totals may actually be ambivalence on the part of individuals.

This quandary faced by officials opens a connection to Kettering Foundation research on public-government relationships. More sophisticated polling methods might certainly help officials. But public deliberation stands out as a preferable means for giving representatives insight into reasons for the volatility of public thinking, by allowing citizens to interpret their thoughts together in settings representatives can attend.

We know that deliberation is not a direct or certain route to a majority or consensus decision, but intervening stages and alternate outcomes of deliberation need names and descriptions. Uncertainty, ambivalence, and equivocation are Alvarez and Brehm’s names for individuals’ thinking processes, but they might also describe group deliberation. Under uncertainty, deliberation will produce a decision only if new information can be acquired. Ambivalence occurs when people face conflicting values or expectations, precisely as is often described in National Issues Forums and other deliberative settings. At this stage, more information and discussion can actually increase tensions and make choosing an option more difficult. Ambivalent deliberators are indecisive — but when value tension is high, decisiveness may not be a virtue. When deliberation produces equivocation, people may agree on their decision, but the reasons behind their choice conflict in ways that complicate communicating their thinking.

Deliberating groups might refer to the following list to understand where they are in their own thinking and what to communicate to public officials:

1. Certainty: we know what we think and why.
2. Uncertainty: we need more information to make a decision.
3. Ambivalence: we think we have enough information, but our values conflict and make this a very hard decision.
4. Equivocation: we can make a decision, but we have differing, perhaps conflicting, reasons for choosing that we may need to resolve.

Alvarez and Brehm’s contribution helps rehabilitate the public as a source of political wisdom and may point the way to a richer conversation between theories of polling and deliberation.

—Neil Carlson
Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799.

Unless expressly stated to the contrary, the articles in Connections reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its trustees, or officers.

Those who contributed to producing this issue include:

Editor…
Mark Bernstein
Program staff…
Randall Nielsen
Connie Gabagan
Phillip Lurie
Maxine Thomas

Graphic Design & Desktop Publishing…
Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.

Copy Editor…
Betty Frecker
Assistant to the Publisher…
Valerie Breidenbach
Publisher…
Kenneth A. Brown

How to Order Kettering Foundation Publications
To request a KF Publications Catalog, call 1-800-600-4060, send a FAX to 1-937-435-7367, or write:
Kettering Foundation
Order Department
P. O. Box 41626
Dayton, OH 45441

Name ____________________________
Title ____________________________
Organization ______________________
Street ____________________________
City ______________________________
State ____ ZIP _________________
Phone (_____) ____________________

For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at www.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.

© Copyright 2004 by the Kettering Foundation