

Reclaiming
*Public
Education*
by
Reclaiming Our
Democracy



DAVID MATHEWS

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Democracy**

David Mathews

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	i
Introducing a Revision	iii
PART ONE: A STANDOFF BETWEEN CITIZENS AND SCHOOLS?	1
Chapter 1 Whose Schools Are These?	3
The Question of Ownership	3
Halfway out the Schoolhouse Door	7
How Ownership Is Lost	8
<i>Wary Professionals</i>	9
<i>The Absence of a Public</i>	11
The Case for Public Building	14
Public Accountability?	15
High Stakes	18
Chapter 2 Why Public/What Public?	19
Schools as a Means to Public Ends	19
Public in Character and Operation	21
Built by Communities, for Communities	22
Products and Agents of Self-Rule	23
Schools and Social Justice	25
Schools without the Public	26
Chapter 3 The Relationship We Have/ The Relationship We Want	33
A Legacy of Distrust	35
Keeping Citizens on the Sidelines	36
The Ideal: “My Kids Are Going to an Excellent School, and I’m Involved with It”	39

People Talk about Their Relationship with the Schools	41
<i>Inattentives</i>	41
<i>Dropouts</i>	41
<i>Shutouts</i>	42
<i>Consumers</i>	43
<i>Partners</i>	44
Partners as Owners	45
The Latent Community Connection	46
Bureaucratic Barriers	49
PART TWO: RETHINKING “THE PUBLIC”	53
Chapter 4 What Only the Public Can Do	55
The Opportunities	55
Creating Places for Learning	57
Harnessing All That Educates	59
Using Public Work	62
<i>Public Work to Reinforce Schools</i>	62
<i>Public Work in the Politics of Education</i>	67
Chapter 5 Public Building	71
In the Beginning . . .	71
Step-by-Step	72
Public Engagement and School Engagement	74
Engagement and Democracy	77
Public Building in Suggsville	78
The Language of Public Building	82
Chapter 6 Practices That Empower	85
The Fundamentals	85
1. <i>Naming Problems in Terms of What Is Most Valuable to Citizens</i>	85
2. <i>Framing Issues to Identify All the Options</i>	88
3. <i>Deliberating Publicly to Make Sound Decisions</i>	92

Deliberation and Democracy	94
<i>To Move beyond First Reactions and Popular Opinion</i>	94
<i>To Work through Strong Emotions</i>	95
<i>To Change Perceptions</i>	96
<i>To Make Progress When Consensus Is Impossible</i>	98
<i>To Locate the Boundaries of the Politically Permissible</i>	99
From Decision Making to Action and Beyond	100
<i>4. Complementing Institutional Planning with Civic Commitment</i>	100
<i>5. Adding Public Acting to Institutional Action</i>	101
<i>6. Turning Evaluation into Civic Learning</i>	103
Not Six, but One	105
PART THREE: PUBLIC POLITICS IN PRACTICE	107
Chapter 7 Politics by the People	109
Different “Rules”	109
Other Sources of Political Power	113
Leadership from Everyone	115
Political Space without a Street Address	116
Chapter 8 Ideas in Practice: What Professionals and Citizens Can Do Together	121
Drawing on the Concepts of Public Naming and Framing	122
“Auditing” Democratic Practices to Stimulate New Insights	124
Tapping into the Appeal of Education as an Idea	127
Seeing the Community as an Educator	129
Using Democratic Practices to Rethink Professional Routines	130
Going into a Larger Arena	133
On Reflection	137
Bibliography	143
Index	159

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Reclaiming Public Education

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INTRODUCING A REVISION

The adults who have the most direct influence on young people include their parents, relatives, teachers, principals, coaches, and next-door neighbors. But these aren't necessarily the people who make the decisions about school policies. Ironically, those with the greatest opportunities to shape the lives of the next generation "are at the end of a long chain of authority stretching from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue through state capitals to districts to local schools and finally into classrooms."¹ This book was written for people who may see themselves at the bottom of that pile. I believe there are ways for them to enrich our schools and, at the same time, reinvigorate our democracy, which is inseparable from education.

People's sense that they can't influence what happens in the public schools is a symptom of a deeper problem. In 1996, the Kettering Foundation published *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* (which I'll call *Is There?* from now on). It reported on a decade of studies that all pointed to one alarming conclusion: many Americans doubted the public schools were really their schools. They weren't just critical of the instruction; they didn't think there was much they could do about any of their concerns. They couldn't change the schools, and the schools appeared to be incapable of reforming themselves.² People's inability to make a difference was confirmation of their lack of

¹ In a chapter entitled "A Solution That Lost Its Problem: Centralized Policymaking and Classroom Gains," Larry Cuban argued that the people who are viewed as the problem in education (members of local boards and their agents) are the very people who are in the best position to solve the problem because of their direct influence on children. His chapter appeared in *Who's in Charge Here? The Tangled Web of School Governance and Policy*, ed. Noel Epstein (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p. 104.

² Paul Hill found high schools still resistant to change in his 2001 article, "Breaking the Hermetic Seal," *School Administrator Web Edition* (March 2001). After *Is There?* was published, studies done by the Annenberg Institute continued to find that "in some places, support for public education has worn perilously thin." Annenberg Institute on Public Engagement for Public Education, *Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change* (Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998), pp. 13-14.

ownership.³ Citizens reasoned that if they really owned the schools, they could help make the improvements in them they would like to see; otherwise, they couldn't be held responsible for what the schools did. This perception is not just a school problem; it is a serious political problem.⁴

Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy picks up on the loss of public ownership and discusses what might be done about it. The first thing that can be done to reconnect the public and the schools is to recognize that there are significant differences between the way professional educators and most school board members see problems, make decisions, and go about their work, on the one hand, and the way citizens-as-citizens view problems, make decisions, and go about their work, on the other. Neither way is inherently better; each is appropriate for its group. The difficulty is that educators and citizens often pass like ships in the night, sometimes even using the same terms for problems but not with the same meanings. "Higher standards," for instance, is a phrase that citizens and educators both use, although they don't necessarily mean the same thing by it. These misunderstandings are common in the best of circumstances, but unfortunately, circumstances aren't always the best; educators and citizens can be in serious disagreement.⁵

In June 2005, research by the Educational Testing Service showed how wide the gap had become between educators and the citizenry—

³ Few people, if any, actually say, "we want to regain ownership of our schools." But Americans do say, "we need to get our schools back" or "we want our schools back." Those remarks are usually made when some external authority has replaced local authority—for example, when the state government has taken control of a school district that has been financially irresponsible. So "ownership" is a word that interprets what people are saying; it isn't necessarily their word.

⁴ For more on the erosion of institutions of local self-government, see Martha Derthick, *Keeping the Compound Republic: Essays on American Federalism* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001).

⁵ In the book, I have tried to distinguish teachers from administrators, but sometimes I lump them together as "educators." I don't mean to abandon the distinction, however. Teachers have told me that they have unique opportunities to engage citizens because they often have the closest association with them, particularly parents. Much remains to be written about how these ties could be used in public building.

specifically between teachers and parents.⁶ As David Broder wrote after seeing the research, “Clearly the educators and the public are on different wavelengths when it comes to conditions in our schools. That is a real barrier to progress.”⁷ What these differences in perceptions and priorities are, why they arise, and how they might be overcome are questions I’ll try to speak to.

— ❖ —

People’s sense that they don’t own the schools is also a major problem for American democracy. The perception in and of itself would be troubling enough, but it doesn’t stand alone. Americans feel the same way about many other institutions they created to serve them, including the electoral system and the government. Citizens say they have been pushed out of politics by a professional political class. “The government is supposed to work for us,” they complain, “we are supposed to be in charge.” When political leaders have tried to respond to this criticism by offering better services for citizens, people have been quick to say, “we aren’t customers, we *own* the store!”⁸ This feeling of being dispossessed also influences the political climate in which schools operate.

Since this is a book about public education and democracy, it is necessarily about the interrelation of the two. While sermons on the importance of public schools in our democracy are common fare in our rhetoric, less is said about the importance of democracy to public education.⁹ Does a democratic citizenry have any role in education

⁶ For example, the Educational Testing Service found that a majority of Americans thought high schools needed major changes; most educators disagreed. Peter D. Hart and David Winston, *Ready for the Real World? Americans Speak on High School Reform: Executive Summary* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, June 2005).

⁷ David S. Broder, “Split over Schools . . . Parents and Teachers Disagree on Reforms,” *Washington Post*, June 23, 2005.

⁸ Americans’ loss of confidence in government and the political system has been documented in a number of studies, and I reported on some of them in *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

⁹ See Susan Fuhrman and Marvin Lazerson, eds., *The Public Schools*, Institutions of American Democracy Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). In particular, look at Clarence Stone’s discussion of civic capacity and democracy in Chapter 9.

other than paying taxes to support schools? If it does, then schools have as much at stake in the well-being of democracy as democracy has in the well-being of public schools. More about this later, but for now I'll just say that I have more in mind than merely improving the interaction between individual citizens and the schools. More is at stake than pleasant relationships.

I believe that public schools need a citizenry that acts as a responsible public. *And that is what this book is really about—how a democratic public forms and works to improve the education of all Americans.* It's about democracy and, more specifically, the role of the public. Since there are many ways to define both "democracy" and "the public," I will be as clear as I can be about what I mean by both.

While not claiming to have the only correct definition of "democracy," I think it is self-government by a sovereign citizenry that exercises its power in communities, statehouses, and the nation's capital. How do citizens get such power? The short answer for me is that we get our power through our ability to join forces and act collectively both with other citizens and through institutions we create to act for us. It follows then, that in order for Americans to be sovereign (that is, to rule themselves), they must be able to direct the institutions they created to serve them. Those institutions include public schools. "Directing" in this context means to define the purpose or mission of institutions, not to control their day-to-day activities. Democracy is not micromanagement. However, if the citizenry can't determine the mission of institutions such as public schools, self-rule is seriously undermined.

The mission of public schools should grow out of the broad objectives of our democracy. And the first job of citizens is deciding on those objectives or purposes. Some political theorists may argue that the purposes of democracy are fixed—freedom, justice, and so on—and all that remains to be decided are the best means to those ends. I believe, however, that Americans must continually determine what the great principles of democracy mean in the context of changing times. And they have to chart a new course of action when those principles conflict—that is the essence of self-rule.

I equate democracy with self-rule for several reasons—though never to suggest that people can rule themselves without government. Self-rule is not the same as direct democracy. I like the term because

self-rule is consistent with the literal meaning of democracy, which is “rule by the people.” Our Constitution says that “We, the People” are the sovereign power in the country, a power I don’t believe was delegated to the state once the government was created.¹⁰ Self-rule characterized the distinctively American political system that developed on the frontier in the early nineteenth century, a system in which citizens joined forces to bring their collective strength to bear on common problems, and a system based on ideals of individual freedom, shared responsibility, and equity.

In a book aptly titled *Self-Rule*, Robert Wiebe tells the story of how citizen politics came to define democracy in frontier America—despite the ruling elite’s preference for a republic and not a democracy.¹¹ Nineteenth-century self-rule grew out of barn raisings and town meetings; it was a sweaty, hands-on, problem-solving politics. The democracy of self-rule was rooted in collective decision making and acting—especially acting. Settlers on the frontier had to be producers, not just consumers. They had to join forces to build forts, roads, and libraries. They formed associations to combat alcoholism and care for the poor as well as to elect representatives. They also established the first public schools. Their efforts were examples of “public work,” meaning work done *by* not just *for* the public.¹²

You can see public work going on in communities today in the simplest forms of collective action—maybe nothing more than people cleaning up their town to attract outside investors. Citizens take rakes and mowers to the local park. Municipal officials send in crews with dumpsters and heavy equipment to do what rakes and mowers can’t.¹³ Public work on a larger scale protects the environment, builds housing

¹⁰ The controversy over what the Constitution meant by popular sovereignty is discussed in George M. Dennison’s *The Dorr War: Republicanism on Trial, 1831-1861* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1976).

¹¹ Robert H. Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

¹² I took the term “public work” from Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

¹³ More on how citizens act collectively can be found in *For Communities to Work* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2002).

for the homeless, and organizes efforts to rescue victims of unexpected disasters. The ability of citizens to produce things from public work gives them the power to be sovereign.

A great deal of public work has been done for and through education. Americans have wanted to improve the institutions of education because they have seen education as the best means to improve society. The rationale has been that although laws are formative, education is transformative. We have called on the schools to lift people out of poverty and to teach youngsters to respect one another. We have based our faith in self-government on having an educated citizenry schooled in democratic values. From the early days of the Republic through the New Deal and the Great Society, this faith has spawned a vast array of school programs funded by billions of tax dollars. The question now is, if Americans lose confidence that they can call on the schools to serve public purposes, where will they turn to make the improvements in American society that they want?

One thing is certain: Whatever happens to public education will certainly affect America's ongoing experiment in self-rule. That is the reason the public schools are ultimately accountable to democracy, not just to parents or taxpayers.¹⁴

❖

Having sketched out what I believe are some of the problems behind the problems in public education and democracy, let me say a bit about what you will find on these pages. I don't want to mislead anyone into thinking that *Reclaiming Public Education* is completely new; still-relevant sections of *Is There?*, with revisions, have been included. There are also additions, three in particular. First, new material from Kettering studies done after 1996 has been added, along with research from other sources. For example, there is a discussion of changes in school policy, such as the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, usually referred to as NCLB. Since 2001, testing has increased

¹⁴ For histories of the public schools' relationship to democracy, see Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); David Tyack and Elizabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); and David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

and more information than ever is available on students' scores, yet Americans still list education near the top of their concerns. While people believe in having high expectations for students and want some testing to measure how well youngsters are doing academically, many are becoming concerned about unintended but far-reaching consequences of new laws and regulations. That isn't to suggest that people don't recognize improvements that have resulted from recent legislation. One of NCLB's objectives for publishing test scores, for instance, has been met—we are more aware of just how poorly some children are faring. Some children are being left considerably behind. This issue, described by professionals in the 1970s as an "achievement gap," is front-page news again.

Second, writing this book gave me an opportunity to respond to questions raised by readers of *Is There?* The foundation also solicited reactions from people asked to review early drafts of *Reclaiming Public Education*. Both groups wanted to know, if there isn't a public for the public schools, could there be? In order to answer, I had to broaden my focus from "schools" to "education." Education is a collective enterprise that goes beyond schooling, and Americans are more confident in their ability to improve *education* than to change *schools*. Yet citizen-led initiatives in education might do a great deal to reinforce schools. And putting schools in the larger context of all the institutions that educate may be critical to their success. Surely we don't expect schools to flourish in a vacuum.

The third major difference between this book and *Is There?* is that *Reclaiming Public Education* is much more explicit about the public. You may have already noticed that the way I refer to the public isn't customary, and I'll explain why. The point here is that we must have the public we need before we can have the schools we want. Yet a community may not always have the public its schools need—or that the community needs. That's why it is important to understand as much as possible about how a public forms, which I've called "public building."

Public building is done through collective or public work, and the citizenry that does public work is the public. So the public I am writing about is both the agent *doing* the work and the entity *created by* the work. What I am suggesting is something like this: Imagine a group of people playing baseball. The work of playing baseball makes the group into something they weren't as individuals. The playing makes them a

team; it creates the team. The individuals become a team only by playing together. This is the sense in which I mean that public work creates the public or that public building is done through public work.

What may appear to be convoluted semantics has a purpose. It allows us to see the public in a new light as a dynamic force that creates itself in the process of doing its work. We normally think of the public as a static body—a group of people. It is more; it is a citizenry-in-motion. The motion is the public. This insight can be as powerful as the insight of physicists who realized that what appeared to be solid objects were also moving atoms joined together.¹⁵ The concept has particularly interesting implications for efforts to engage the public.

Let me bring this notion of the public back to the schools. The public I am writing about is more than a grassroots of support for schools or even a citizenry that actively endorses a reform proposal or approves school standards. It is a *citizenry that continually makes or produces things through public work*; that is, through collective decision making and acting. An example of such a public can be found on the American frontier, where people joined forces to build schools, found libraries, and open museums. I'll say more in a few pages about what kind of public work can be done in today's circumstances.



I'll conclude with a brief overview of each chapter and the audiences I am writing for. The chapters fall into three major parts. The first three chapters describe forces that once connected schools and the public as well as the forces that have since pushed them apart. For instance, some of the current divisiveness grows out of frustration with the bureaucratic system that has developed around the schools. Not all of the divisive forces, however, originate within the schools. Citizens have developed attitudes that make it difficult for a responsible public to form. I'm talking specifically about a consumeristic mind-set, which is evident in a weak sense of public ownership.¹⁶

¹⁵ I am indebted to a physicist at the University of Dayton, Leno Pedrotti, for this analogy.

¹⁶ Paul Werth Associates, *Final Report* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, May 5, 2003).

The first chapters also expand on the foundation's concept of "the public." Looking at the public as a dynamic force (that is, as a citizenry joined in collective action or work) has particular implications for projects to rally support for the schools. Rallying support is necessary in some communities. But if the public is more than a body to be roused and enlisted, we might consider another kind of engagement, an engagement that taps into the dynamics of public work.¹⁷ The work of making collective decisions and acting on them generates the political equivalent of the electricity that lights a lamp. Engagement could mean plugging into that current, rather than trying to grab the bulb. The bulk of this book is about how citizens and educators might generate and tap into public work.

The most obvious implication of thinking of the public as a dynamic force is that if citizens aren't in motion, if public work isn't going on, then there is no public. That is the reason the public that the schools require doesn't necessarily exist—ready to be enlisted like a group of voters. It has to form around public work. And that is why public engagement has to proceed or go along with school improvement. Because of both reasons, I began calling the sort of engagement I am proposing "public-building" engagement. It is citizens engaging citizens rather than schools engaging people.

One clarification: Reviewers often found it unusual to see "the public" referred to in the singular when it is more common to hear references to various "publics." "The public" seems to imply a homogeneous body. I am not saying that. I am simply referring back to "the public" that is implied in the phrase, "We, the People." We, in all of our diversity, are part of that sovereign entity, which is made up of citizens-in-action.

The second part, beginning with Chapter 4, elaborates on what I just referred to as the things that only the public can do, particularly in education. I wanted to respond to implicit, if not explicit, questions from many reviewers: Why is a public necessary? What can public work accomplish in education?

Because of reservations about the citizenry, many educators are hesitant to involve the public. Some insist that their responsibilities begin and end with their students. Maybe their reservations are

¹⁷ As I recall, Cole Campbell, among others at the foundation, thought it essential to distinguish between the public as a political force and as a political body.

understandable if professionals don't see anything people can contribute. Chapter 4 takes up this issue and makes the case that what citizens produce through their collective efforts can make it easier for teachers, administrators, and school board members to do their jobs. Citizens joined with citizens are able to accomplish what no school board, superintendent, principal, or cadre of teachers can do alone.

This collaboration between the public and the schools is not necessarily the same as the numerous business and civic partnerships that already exist. So much has been written about those partnerships that I haven't felt the need to say more.¹⁸ At Kettering, we have looked for collaboration that involves educators joining forces with citizens doing public work. These joint ventures could strengthen the public at the same time as citizens are creating more community resources for education.

Chapters 5 and 6 go back to the idea that the public is a force and describe the activities or practices that create the force, or "electricity" if you like that analogy. These practices are used in carrying out the tasks of public work. Take the everyday act of giving a name to a problem. It is a critical practice. Naming or describing a problem has to capture people's experience and concerns before they will begin to work on solving it. Unless the name reflects people's reality, the problem isn't really their problem.

The third and final part deals with a practical issue. Even if intrigued by the idea that the public is a dynamic force drawing its energy from the practices used in public work, people sometimes have difficulty figuring out how to incorporate this concept into what they do every day. Chapters 7 and 8 speak to those people—citizens, members of school boards, and educators. This is not a how-to book. Yet the foundation's research has implications for the way both citizens and professionals in education might overcome the obstacles that separate the public from the schools.

Chapter 7, addressed primarily to community organizations and citizens, isn't for civic saints, influential leaders, or important

¹⁸ I found reports like those by Don Davies at the Institute for Responsive Education particularly helpful in tracking the growth of community partnerships and initiatives to involve parents. Don Davies, "The 10th School Revisited: Are School/Family/Community Partnerships on the Reform Agenda Now?" *Phi Delta Kappan* 83 (January 2002): 388-392.

stakeholders. It is for busy, preoccupied folks from anywhere and everywhere in a community. It is about how they can make a difference. The public work that empowers citizens is done best under certain conditions. This chapter identifies those conditions and discusses what people can do when conditions are less than favorable.¹⁹

The chapter also describes the distinctive characteristics of communities where a public has taken shape and become a force in combating problems, especially problems that never seem to go away, those that “take a village to solve.” Democracy in those communities has been anchored in local, civic action and not just in laws and institutions.

I hope this chapter will illustrate the close connection between self-rule and collective responsibility—the willingness of people to own their problems.²⁰ Communities that have been able to bring public work to bear on education haven’t depended primarily on outside resources. They have recognized and drawn on local resources, and then, if necessary, reached out for assistance. This isn’t pick-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps politics; it is civic action moving from within and then going out, not the reverse. These communities have been inventive, not imitative. Small groups of people began where they were with whatever resources they had, which they used in self-directed work. Then they connected the dots, creating larger civic infrastructures that were joined like the tiny creatures that form giant coral reefs.

It stands to reason that communities where collective responsibility is strong, where there is a willingness to own problems and work on them, are communities where public education and public schools are likely to flourish. Surely educators have a stake in the kind of

¹⁹ At the risk of repeating some sources and lines of argument well known to academics, I have included some professional literature references for people who aren’t professional educators. For instance, Clarence Stone had a brief but useful comparison of types of community participation in educational reform in “Linking Civic Capacity and Human Capital Formation,” in *Strategies for School Equity: Creating Productive Schools in a Just Society*, ed. Marilyn J. Gittell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 163-176.

²⁰ See Harry Boyte’s work in *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980) and *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) as well as Vaughn L. Grisham Jr.’s research on *Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 1999).

democracy that promotes this sort of community. As Robert Putnam has written, “revitalizing American community life may be a prerequisite for revitalizing American education.”²¹

Chapter 8 takes on the attractive but questionable assumption that if the schools do a better job, public trust will be restored and the alienation will end. It is a natural assumption. Improving school performance, however, may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for bridging the divide between the public and the schools. To the extent that the alienation grows out of a lack of ownership, something will have to be done to restore ownership.

If public ownership has to be restored, what does that imply for educators? Do they have to learn still more skills and somehow find the time to use them? Kettering’s research suggests not. Professionals need only find ways to do what they normally do in a fashion that makes it easier, not harder, for the public to do its job.

Chapter 8 is also about what professional educators and citizens might do together. The chapter describes the ways some educators have plugged into public practices in order to solve immediate problems—and, at the same time, increased the capacity of people to work as a public. It ends with a suggestion for how professionals in schools might escape some of the downdrafts of distrust they encounter by repositioning themselves and their schools in the larger public arena.

As I wrote this final section, I was thinking particularly about members of local school boards. They are in a strategic position to do something about the lack of public ownership. And they have an enormous stake in whether the public takes responsibility for the schools—and whether there is a public in their community. Unfortunately, boards today are at risk of being isolated from the citizenry that elects them. Not all Americans consider these boards their agents, and they don’t find board meetings receptive forums for discussing their concerns.

School trustees, hemmed in by a multitude of government regulations and bombarded by litigation, have their own frustrations.

²¹ Robert D. Putnam, “Community-Based Social Capital and Educational Performance,” in *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*, ed. Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 87.

They struggle to cope with externally imposed restrictions, which many believe undermine their ability to act in the best interest of their schools. Rather than having a coherent mandate from the public, they find themselves buffeted by a host of very particular or categorical requirements, all made in the name of “the public.” Unable to meet the expectations of citizens because of these restrictions, they face an often-contentious crowd at their meetings.

Even more serious, the very legitimacy of boards has been questioned by critics who characterize them as “vestigial organs, like tonsils or appendixes.” Some boards have been singled out as “havens for political junkies, launching pads for mayoral aspirants, [and] bastions of ideological discontent.” Almost everyone grants that trustees are well-meaning citizens, but critics suggest that these good folks would do better to take up some other cause like visiting nursing homes. This disdain isn’t merely the grumbling of a few malcontents. Mayors, encouraged by state legislatures, have taken control of school boards in some cities. Given the pressure from all sides, it is hard to imagine how school boards can do their jobs without a responsible public that does its job.²²



Although I am not writing about simply improving the relationship between citizens and educators, the tensions between the two show up in so much of the research that it is impossible to move on to the issue of public ownership without recognizing the problem. Without taking one side or the other, or assessing the validity of the charges and countercharges, I’ll put the connection between the public and the public schools in a historical context. Stepping back sometimes improves our outlook. And I’ll report on the kind of relationship many Americans wish they had with the schools, both as individuals and as members of a community. The central question is whether Americans have reached a standoff with the public schools. Or is what citizens want in their relationship with educators not all that different from what teachers and administrators want in their relationship with the public?

²² Jay Mathews, “Are School Boards Really Necessary?” *Washington Post*, April 10, 2001.