



# MAZE OF MISTRUST

How District Politics and Cross Talk Are Stalling Efforts  
To Improve Public Education

A Report from the Kettering Foundation and the FDR Group

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## **Acknowledgments**

The **FDR Group** would like to thank the four school districts and many educators and community members who participated in this research. They will remain anonymous, but this study would have been impossible without them. We'd like to thank our friend and colleague, Jean Johnson, for her editing, encouragement, and wisdom. We'd like to thank 14 special reviewers whose advice and observations did so much to improve this report. We'd like to thank our partners, Phil Lurie and especially Randall Nielsen, for their patient guidance. Finally, we acknowledge Dr. David Mathews, whose insights about democracy and citizen participation in public life so critically informed this work.

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**Cover image:** ©Steven Georges/Press-Telegram/Corbis

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ISBN: 978-0-923993-59-7



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# Foreword

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

Much has happened in the two decades since. The standards and accountability movement became more formally enshrined, most notably in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. One rather predictable response has been a more explicit recognition of the roles that parents and others in communities play in the education of young people. References to “public engagement” have become commonplace in the

**The study is intended to be diagnostic rather than remedial.**

vernacular of professional education.

What has changed in the politics of education in school districts? In 2013, the Kettering Foundation asked Steve Farkas, the lead researcher of the *Divided Within* study, to look anew at the state of relationships around education in communities. Among the questions to explore:

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

Readers should note that the study is intended to be diagnostic rather than remedial. We hope the report prompts practical interest in thinking anew about the engagement and accountability movements, and about ways that the work of professionals in schools can be more constructively aligned with the work that others need to be doing. We welcome anyone so prompted to let us know what you are thinking and learning.

**Randall Nielsen**  
Program Officer  
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# Introduction



**“Glacial” is how one expert has described the country’s progress** on K-12 education over the last 20 years.<sup>1</sup> Despite sweeping reforms under Presidents Bush and Obama, billions of dollars invested by government and philanthropy, and new policies in districts nationwide, results remain disappointing. Less than half of American students meet proficiency levels in reading and math. Achievement gaps between richer and poorer students are wide—and still as troubling as ever.<sup>2</sup>

With so much attention given to K-12 education, why has improvement been so hard to come by? Why do reforms and innovations produce only pockets of change? What are we missing?

## Examining the Environment of Reform in Communities

There are obviously many explanations for our nation’s troubled schools, including the persistence of childhood poverty, higher expectations dictated by a changing global economy, and the sheer size and diversity of the country’s educational enterprise. But this report examines another explanation that may not be receiving the attention it warrants. *Maze of Mistrust* explores the human dynamics—those individual and community patterns of communication and behavior that can either smooth the way for change or stymie it at every turn.

What emerges from this research is the proposition that local politics, distrust, miscommunication, and unhealthy relationships caused by lingering suspicions and old grudges play a surprisingly powerful role in blocking progress. In effect, the political and community milieu of reform has become a major stumbling block.

*Maze of Mistrust* is an on-the-ground look at how four school districts in different circumstances are working to improve education, and why reforms are proving so difficult for them to implement. It provides clear and compelling clues about why so many reform ideas fail to gain traction, and why the process of improving schools has been such slow going. It also suggests that a broad range of strategies to improve schools—strengthening accountability, increasing training, improving technology, making smarter investments, and building the family and community supports that bolster learning—are falling victim to a legacy of mistrust.

Moreover, this report identifies a formidable challenge for those working to enhance democratic values and promote greater citizen and community responsibility for education and other shared concerns. Our research shows that even though school and district leaders have adopted the language and some of the surface conventions of engagement, genuine dialogue, understanding, and inclusiveness are still largely missing.

The chief takeaway from this research is this: until we explicitly recognize and grapple more effectively with the fundamentally community-based human and political obstacles to constructive innovations in education, progress will be limited—no matter how clever the reforms or how sincere their advocates.

## An Old and Deep-Seated Problem

*Maze of Mistrust* is a sequel to a 1993 Kettering Foundation-Public Agenda study entitled *Divided Within, Besieged Without*:

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*The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts*, which also delved into the communal lives of districts. When that study was released, press coverage of schools was replete with culture-war stories on controversies over religion in the

**The 1993 study revealed that school districts were beset by special interest politics gone awry and dysfunctional stakeholder relationships.**

schools, sex education, and the proper teaching of history. International comparisons showcased lagging student achievement in the United States, while op-eds highlighted the plight of high school graduates who “couldn’t even read their own

diplomas.” There was a scramble to improve the nation’s schools and boost student learning.

Attempting to get at the problems behind those symptoms, the 1993 study revealed that school districts were beset by special-interest politics gone awry and dysfunctional stakeholder relationships.

For America’s more than 13,000 public school districts, a lot has changed in the 20 years since *Divided Within, Besieged Without* was published. We thought it would be enlightening to revisit some of the issues uncovered in that first study, and to ask some new questions as well by again examining the lives of four school districts. We were especially interested in how the standards and accountability movement had affected the ways professional educators described their relationships with citizens and other organizations in the challenges of educating youth in their communities.

We used the same research techniques employed in the earlier work, spending several days in each district conducting interviews and focus groups (see Methodology on page 27 for more information on how the study was conducted). Our analysis draws upon the stories, anecdotes, and perceptions we collected; in total, more than 100 people were interviewed from 2012 to 2013. In developing the research and analyzing the results, we also drew upon what we have learned in twenty-plus years of collaborating with school districts and working on education policy issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Joy Resmovits, “National Test Scores Show Slight Math, Reading Increases for American Students,” *Huffington Post*, November 11, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/07/national-test-scores\\_n\\_4229264.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/07/national-test-scores_n_4229264.html) (accessed May 25, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Motoko Rich, “U.S. Reading and Math Scores Show Slight Gain,” *The New York Times*, November 7, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/08/education/us-reading-and-math-scores-show-incremental-gains.html?hpw&rref=education&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/08/education/us-reading-and-math-scores-show-incremental-gains.html?hpw&rref=education&_r=0) (accessed May 14, 2014).

# Our Research at a Glance



***Maze of Mistrust* is an on-the-ground look at how four school districts in different circumstances are working to improve education and why reform is proving so difficult. It is an update of a similar study conducted in 1993 entitled *Divided Within, Besieged Without*, and like its predecessor, it provides compelling clues to why so many reform ideas have failed to gain traction, why reform has produced only pockets of change, and why improving schools will continue to be slow going until we address the mistrust and dysfunctional politics derailing change. Among the chief observations from the research are:**

- School leaders, teachers, and other educators typically see themselves—and public education more generally—as besieged and repeatedly second-guessed. This perception is prevalent in both small and large districts, and it colors educators’ responses to reform and innovation. It also undermines a number of the important relationships needed to promote and sustain change.
- District leaders—superintendents, school board members, and other administrators—long for stronger community and frequently invoke the term “public engagement.” However, most define it as advancing their own agenda, and their experiences with public engagement (as they understand it) are often negative. Meanwhile, new communication technologies have amplified the potential for partisanship. In one district, for example, a blog caused sustained political infighting and paralysis.
- Most teachers believe they are being left out of conversations on improving education, and the gap between teachers and district leadership identified in the 1993 research persists and may have increased. Not only do teachers feel alienated, many see themselves as vulnerable to district politics and retaliation if they speak out or rock the boat in any way.
- Although educators acknowledge the key roles parents and communities play in children’s learning,

most see the schools as a focal point of education. Moreover, past experiences working with families and communities have led many to see these “outside” entities as unreliable partners. For most educators, their first obligation is to the children. If families and communities can help, great. If not, schools are honor-bound to go it alone.

- The ability of districts to solve problems and garner community support varies considerably. It’s rare, but when a district and key groups in the community collaborate and trust each other, many good things become possible. It’s more common to see relationships defined by neglect or even resentment. The legacy of disappointments and power struggles repeatedly derails current problem solving. There is simply no reservoir of trust to draw on.

*Maze of Mistrust* suggests that progress in improving education will require more focus on the human and political aspects of reform. It also identifies a formidable challenge for those working to promote greater community engagement in education and other issues. This research shows that even though district leaders have adopted the language and some of the surface conventions of engagement, actual understanding—let alone genuine dialogue—are still largely missing.

# *Divided Within, Besieged Without:* The Dynamics of Reform 20 Years Ago

**Published in 1993**, *Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts* was an in-depth qualitative study that looked at the communications and working relationships between and among the individuals and groups who enact change at the local level. At the time, President Bush's No Child Left Behind legislation was still a decade away. Hot-button issues, such as charter schools and using test data to evaluate teachers, principals, and schools, were still on the horizon.

Through in-depth interviews with school and community leaders and focus groups with parents and teachers in four distinct school districts, the research uncovered divisions from within, with stakeholder groups, such as teachers, administrators, and school boards, often mutually suspicious and working at cross-purposes. From without, the districts faced disconnection from their communities: business groups, local government officials, taxpayers, and civic organizations were sometimes clamoring for change and often mystified by what the schools were up to. The study pointed out that understanding

the troubled relationships among key stakeholders in the districts, as well as the relationships with their communities, was essential to understanding why change would be difficult.

The report warned that school reform initiatives would inevitably be stymied by the widespread fragmentation and political infighting besetting school districts—the central office-teacher divide, the growing distance between the school districts and community organizations, fatigue with the cycle of reforms, political gridlock, and the prevalence of distrust and miscommunication. *Divided Within, Besieged Without* garnered attention partly because it went against the grain, focusing not on the substance of reform but the politics—the difficult politics as it turned out—of implementation. In writing about the study's findings, *The New York Times'* education writer Susan Chira said, "Most systems are top-heavy with bureaucrats, mired in regulations that discourage risk-taking, buffeted by politics and filled with special interests. . . . The status quo has few defenders of any political stripe."

# Professional Educators in Defense Mode



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**School leaders, teachers, and other educators frequently see themselves—and public schooling more generally—as besieged and repeatedly second-guessed. This perception is remarkably strong, even at the local level and in both small communities and larger ones. The dynamic colors educators’ responses to innovations and calls for reform, and it undermines relationships within and outside the schools that are needed to advance progress. In fact, these frayed nerves almost prevented the study from being done.**

Perhaps the most striking observation from this research is the degree to which educational professionals, even at the district level and even in smaller communities, see themselves as operating in a climate of relentless criticism and second-guessing—one that affects nearly every aspect of their work. We observed this sense of unease among local school leaders, teachers, and even university faculty over multiple studies.<sup>3</sup> The intensity and incivility of the national education debate has also become increasingly prominent.<sup>4</sup>

This mindset among educators presented a significant new challenge for conducting our research. In the two decades since the original 1993 study, it has become much harder to find four school districts that would agree to participate in the research. Despite having extensive contacts with districts across the country, and even with the customary guarantees of individual and district-level anonymity, we ran across reluctance and wariness, with district leader after district leader begging off. This was partly a function of cutbacks and hard financial times, as many explained. One superintendent who declined to participate said, “I’d love to help but I can’t. Arranging people’s time so they can talk with you means work hours will be lost. With all the state cutbacks we can’t afford it; I can’t justify it to my board.”

But we understood that something else was also at work. Permeating these polite refusals was the reality that nerves within school districts had become far more frayed over the

past twenty years. Too much had been hitting these districts; political infighting is more prevalent, leaders are under much more scrutiny, and district stakeholders suspect hidden agendas everywhere. Leaders of districts that had declined to participate cited levy votes, collective bargaining, infighting among school board members, and low-level crises of one sort or another. Virtually nothing was denuded of political significance.

With sensitivities so on edge, inviting in a group of outside researchers—even if they are described as researchers without local loyalties or agendas—can disturb a district’s internal equilibrium. “Why risk it?” district leaders asked themselves. We almost lost one district when, as we were negotiating our invite, a local reporter got wind of the plan and called us with questions: Who hired us? What were we going to do in the district, and was it to prepare for an upcoming change in leadership? How much would it cost? Thankfully, the superintendent and school board stuck with their decision to proceed. An interview with a board member from this district illustrated the sensitivities at play:

*The threat of litigation hangs over so much of what we do. People don’t want to talk without their lawyers present. It’s much harder to negotiate, everything has to be cleared—will this be something they can sue us over? Is this going to hold up in court? It’s hard to be a leader*

**Rather than entering into discussions about improving schools with confidence and candor, many focus first and foremost on protecting themselves and their districts from attack.**

*when you are constantly looking over your shoulder.*

The era of accountability also appears to have had an effect. Publicized ratings and test scores drive heightened sensitivities as district staff members feel they are under far more scrutiny. In one of

our collaborating districts, several principals explained the changed atmosphere. One said:

*The environment that I was in in 1990 was a big urban district, everyone was happy-go-lucky, you had a teachers' development center, everything was in abundance. We have much more accountability today. There were no common assessments back in the day. Teachers are under more scrutiny, principals too. I mean you have to watch what you say. Nobody wants to lose their job.*

This pervasive and omnipresent sense of being judged and second-guessed was not confined to school leaders in highly visible elected or appointed offices. As the principal above notes, teachers also feel a similar unease and sense of vulnerability, a theme we examine in more detail later on.

### **Implications**

The result of these combined pressures is that educators from the district office to the classroom often operate in defense mode. Rather than entering into discussions about improving schools with confidence and candor, many focus first and foremost on protecting themselves and their districts from attack. Well-intentioned or not, criticism is often seen as an attempt to undermine them personally and public education more generally.

The broad perception among professional educators that critics, who don't understand their challenges, are poised to second-guess them at every turn often shapes their response to calls for change. Addressing this nearly ubiquitous sense of unease among educators may be a prerequisite to garnering their wholehearted commitment to change.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Public Agenda, *Stand By Me: What Teachers Really Think about Unions, Merit Pay & Other Professional Matters* (2003) [http://www.publicagenda.org/files/stand\\_by\\_me.pdf](http://www.publicagenda.org/files/stand_by_me.pdf); Jean Johnson, et al., "Teaching for a Living: How Teachers See the Profession Today," Public Agenda, <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/teaching-for-a-living> (both accessed May 14, 2014), and the forthcoming Kettering/Public Agenda study on the views of faculty in education and teacher preparation, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Simon, "Name Calling Turns Nasty in the Education World," *Politico* (November 8, 2013), <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/11/education-debates-rhetoric-99556.html?hp=t1> (accessed May 25, 2014).

# The Challenges Facing Public Engagement



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**District leaders—superintendents, school board members, and other administrators—often long for stronger community (and national) support, and they frequently embrace the term “public engagement.” However, most define it as advancing and building support for their own agendas, and their experiences with it (as they understand it) are often negative.**

In the early 1990s, new ideas about ways of interacting with citizens on education began to emerge. The term “public engagement” became widely used, suggesting the promise of bridging the gaps among parents, central office administrators, teachers, community groups, and distinct constituencies.<sup>5</sup> A key aspect of the strategy was to create constructive dialogue over challenges and policy options *before* decisions were made. The assumption was that if you encourage people to wrestle with the problems facing youth and the schools, and allow them to contribute their analysis and their ideas for action, the policies emerging at the end would enjoy broad-based commitment from diverse groups.<sup>6</sup> Relationships among the key groups in a district would improve.

As it happened, to the leaders of the districts in this study, “public engagement” most commonly meant making an effort to explain their initiatives to distinct groups in the community in order to win support for things leadership already decided needed to be done. Secondly, they used public engagement techniques to gauge community concerns and serve as early indications of resistance to potential initiatives. Lastly, public engagement created venues to absorb the objections of squeaky wheels—persistent advocates who needed to be heard. Very few looked to nonprofessionals for useful advice about improving schools and enhancing children’s learning. Nor did they see others in their districts

as collaborators in the education of youth. Leaders longed for more community “support,” but they mainly regarded people outside the schools as constituencies they needed to manage, coax, or reassure.

## Lack of Involvement as a Green Light

In all four of the districts we studied, traditional outreach strategies were still the most common means for communicating with communities. Many school leaders, for example, pointed to school board meetings as a way to gauge or indicate how well they connected with their communities. Ironically, it was a good sign when school board meetings were sparsely attended. When few people complain at the microphone about a district proposal or policy, the lack of controversy affirms a district’s belief that their relationship with voters is in good shape. As one school board member said:

*The less we hear from the public the better our relationship with our community is. There’s very low turnout to our meetings, unless there is a unique situation, like when we had to rezone students to a newly built high school. There was squawking then. Otherwise, there’s very low turnout and not too much competition in school board elections. A quiet public is a happy public. We can leave the work to the educators.*

Leaders used school board meetings as an early-warning device. If only a few citizens showed up and the number of

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people speaking out against an initiative was negligible, that often counted as public permission. Lack of resistance was taken as a green light. An administrator tried to explain the thinking process of the citizens in his district:

*People are thinking "It'll run fine without me." They don't think it's their job to be there. They're going to take care of it, until it's a controversial issue, and even then few people show up. I kept looking out, people don't even know the meetings are taking place. People are apathetic.*

Another go-to indicator of healthy community relations is the result of levy votes: did voters accept or reject their last property tax proposal? In each of the districts we studied, leadership referred to the most recent levy vote as a premier signal of whether they were in step or out of step with the residents of their communities. Sometimes they checked themselves in our interviews and confessed that the voting result was a bit of a mystery to them. A small percentage of eligible voters would typically vote, so outcomes—successes or failures—could be attributed to a minority of activists, or communication, or broader factors such as the economy. Still, as with the perception of sparse turnout at school board meetings, weak voter turnout meant that people were at least not angry with them.

### **Town Meetings That Fail to Inform**

In one district, the leadership was on edge because they were proposing a new and potentially controversial initiative to allow families outside district boundaries to enroll their children. In preparation, a series of open citizen meetings were held across the district, in addition to several board meetings where the issue was discussed and concerns were supposed to be heard. "I was astounded that we had nobody last night," said the superintendent. "This would've been the fifth meeting now, because we had two board meetings that discussed open enrollment and then we had our two

town meetings, and then last night was the fifth meeting over a 3-month time period." The board passed the measure by a comfortable margin, but the leadership, including board members and the district superintendent, was uncomfortable. From its perspective, it had made a serious effort to engage its citizenry, but it still did not have a good handle on how residents felt about it. Was there hidden resistance that would come back to haunt them? Or did people just not care? Or was the outreach not well executed?

In our interviews, active parents who attended the meetings believed the intent of conveners was persuasion, not an open discussion of the pros and cons of various options. They thought that apathy and busy lives explained why some people did not show up. But they also believed that many did not show up because the outcome—what the district wanted to do—was predetermined. One parent described his experience with the open enrollment meetings this way:

*It's not meaningful engagement. . . . Engage me in a way that's meaningful that's about educating our kids. We don't have that. There's a meeting, and they come in and they do a polished presentation, and it's not negative, it's nice, but as far as being messy and getting parents' real reactions and truly engaging them, I think that's scary for educators.*

### **On the Lookout for Better Communications Tools**

Given their hazy understanding of what district residents actually want, most of the school leaders we interviewed had become convinced that they needed to do more to connect with their constituencies. Thus, the districts have been routinely pursuing additional outreach techniques: opinion collection methods, such as surveys and focus groups; strategic visioning and planning exercises with district stakeholders (e.g., board members, teachers, active parents); and community meetings

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to reach ordinary citizens and parents. Each of the districts we studied had employed at least one of those techniques, and more than once. And in each of the districts, school leaders defined those techniques as part of public engagement.

For two superintendents and their school boards, public engagement primarily entailed conducting surveys within the district as a means of tracking public satisfaction and areas of concern. These efforts had become institutionalized, routine procedures, with the same survey questions administered on a yearly basis. One district hired a firm that specialized in conducting school surveys, delivering a pre-constructed questionnaire that had been fielded in dozens of other districts. District leaders confided to us that as time passed, teachers or parents were less and less likely to respond thoughtfully to the surveys or to respond at all. The results were routinely positive and noncontroversial, but leadership suspected that they were not really learning anything useful from the research. Still, to drop the surveys could be taken to mean the district had stopped listening, so the survey would be fielded yet again.

One school board member was very explicit about using web-based surveys to siphon public energy so that citizen input was manageable.

*Information is hard to get to the public—you put a committee together but things get hijacked, only a few people show up. Then people listen to rumors. Now they want to be part of the superintendent search—it's not going to happen. We need leadership, someone needs to decide "The Who." The characteristics we need, they can weigh in via the survey on the web on the characteristics we need, "The What." So we let people weigh in via forums and surveys, but let a professional search team find candidates for us.*

It was clear that conducting the surveys was at least partly

driven by a sincere democratic impulse—it was a good thing to hear from the public—and the desire to appear to be attentive and responsive to public or parental or teacher attitudes. But one of the ironic outcomes of survey-taking in districts was that it seemed to lead to further disconnection between the leadership and the frontline staff and parents. In one district, a few teachers had even taken to writing insults on the margins of paper surveys. Real consideration of research findings about public preferences or concerns was the exception. Thus, a tool intended to bolster public engagement ended up fostering disengagement instead.

### **New Technology That Misfires**

The explosion in communication technology—e-mail, web, cell phones, online social networks, and blogs—is arguably, alongside the standards movement, the most profound change affecting districts since the 1993 study was conducted. At first blush, the technology boon should have enabled a leap in the effectiveness of communication for school districts, and in some ways it has. Districts are now able to produce professional newsletters, distribute updates quickly via e-mail and over their websites, and conduct auto-calls to the homes of their students. But our research indicates that it is, at best, a double-edged sword. Sometimes, as we will see below, the technology appears to have amplified dissension and quickened the pace with which district relationships deteriorate. One of our districts, for example, was subject to paralysis and political warfare because of a blog.

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New technology comes with its own built-in demands. If a district wants a website that residents can use as a source of information, it has to be kept up-to-date. If the superintendent wants to have a blog, he or she has to commit to updating it with timely postings of interest. Policies regarding interacting with the new forms of communication have to be

**Sometimes technology appears to have amplified dissension.**

established; will people have the opportunity to comment on the website or in response to a blog posting? The districts we visited decided this would open up too many opportunities for trouble and controversy, as well as requiring too much energy to moderate and monitor. So their websites became little more than Internet-based newsletters and collections of policies and contact information. The school districts are paying more and more attention to limiting online access of staff and students and strengthening firewalls and restrictions, motivated by both security and concerns over appropriate use. One district was still dealing with the fallout after a teacher cut and pasted a superintendent's e-mail message and sent it off to colleagues with her own colorful commentary, including derogatory language, using her district e-mail address.

Cell phones have also become problematic—and not just because they've become a point of tension between parents, teachers, and students over use within buildings and classrooms. In one district, teachers were required to document three types of efforts to communicate with the parents of students who were struggling: reaching out to them by e-mail, on their home phone, and on their cell phone. They felt more burdened than ever—the onus was on them to prove and to document that they had done due diligence in updating parents and students. Meanwhile,

teachers said, there was no comparable requirement made for parents and students.

### **A Blog Hijacks a District**

One district was fractured by dissension and vitriol when a blogger regularly posted highly critical commentary about internal, private conversations among school board members. Stakeholders within the district—active parents, teachers, and administrators—were swept along by contentious remarks posted on a weekly basis, remarks that seemed to be based upon actual discussions. A district that had been outwardly peaceful and civil deteriorated into open nastiness as relationships became strained. Parents even formed a committee whose mission it was to press the district board for more civility. Finally, the blogger stopped posting; the school board member apparently responsible for the leaks decided to cease-fire. "Technology made things much harder," said one administrator. "The blog made it possible for the most shrill people to have an impact. People are not obligated to talk responsibly, they say hurtful things, and they could make accusations without evidence. They don't even have to face those they hurt or take responsibility for what they say."

### **Accessible, but Out of Touch**

For some school leaders, communication technology offered a false sense of security about the strength of their engagement with the community. When asked about public engagement in his district, one of the superintendents quickly pointed out that his personal cell phone number was commonly known, and used, by the parents in his district during all hours of the day and on weekends. Much like customer service, accessibility to parents was the key part of his definition of his role. His instinct told him that as long as parents could reach him and he could respond to their concerns, he was engaging them.

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In sharp contrast, the same superintendent launched an initiative to replace all textbooks with e-readers in the middle grades without broaching the idea to parents or teachers—and surprisingly, without much consultation with his board. Instructional innovation through technology was the cornerstone of this superintendent’s vision. He assumed the money saved would placate his board, that parents would love technology-based learning, and that teachers would go along if everyone else did. Meanwhile, our interviews with parents, teachers, and board members coincidentally revealed that resistance to his initiative was building. Some parents didn’t want to lose the experience of looking at books with their children. Teachers were skeptical that kids would use the technology appropriately and worried that they would have to field too many logistical problems. (The initiative was substantially modified in the next academic year.)

### Implications

Each of our districts’ superintendents defined public engagement as a critical part of their job; most school board members were eager to connect and communicate with residents. But as we probed, we found that school leaders were often using new forms of convening techniques (such

as small and large group forums), as well as conventional forms of communication in the service of a traditional goal: getting people to support their agenda. We also learned that many parents, teachers, principals, and community residents grew to understand and resent this. District leaders would create new venues for engaging staff or community groups and expectations would rise. But levels of trust—and participation—were hurt when those expectations went unmet. People became more skeptical as they saw that the newer public engagement techniques served the same ends as the older communication tactics. Ironically, public engagement—the very strategy intended to reconnect districts to their constituents and ameliorate divisions among stakeholders—ended up making relationships worse.

**School leaders were often using new forms of convening techniques as well as conventional communication in the service of a traditional goal: getting people to support their agenda.**

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<sup>5</sup> For a stocktaking of the professional use of the term “public engagement” circa 1999, see Mathews and Nielsen, “Finding the Public in Public Engagement,” *The School Administrator* 56, no. 8 (1999), <http://aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=14618> (accessed May 25, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> For one—far fuller—description of public engagement, see Public Agenda’s 2008 primer on the concept at <http://www.publicagenda.org/media/public-engagement> (accessed May 25, 2014).

# The Teacher-Central Office Divide



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**Despite lip service paid to the importance of teachers, most teachers believe they have been left out of conversations about improving education and blamed for problems beyond their control. The gap between teachers and district leadership identified in earlier research persists and may have even increased in some areas. Not only do teachers feel alienated, many see themselves as vulnerable to district politics and retaliation if they speak out or rock the boat.**

**The strategy of public engagement**—supported by extensive literature on institutional change by key thinkers like Peter Drucker and Daniel Yankelovich<sup>7</sup>—suggests that reform would have more staying power if district leaders first engaged stakeholder groups, such as teachers, with the intention of understanding their concerns, anticipating problems, and making adjustments. Theoretically, at least, school leaders and teachers would then work as partners on initiatives to improve schools and enhance learning.

But the teacher-central office gap depicted in 1993's *Divided Within* shows no sign of diminishing. Across all four of the districts in this study, classroom teachers and central office administrators are still living in different worlds, even in the smallest of communities. According to teachers, initiatives are sprung on them with little engagement and only surface consultation. When things don't work as expected, the initiatives are pulled or revised. In many respects, the frustrations of teachers interviewed in this current study are precisely the ones we heard in the research conducted twenty years ago.

The sense of being left out of their district's discussions about problems and solutions was a recurring theme. Teachers typically felt that meetings initiated by their district leaders—with the ostensible purpose of listening to them—were just another tool to persuade them to go along with the program.

One teacher described the process this way:

*They'll put out the feelers like they want our opinion, but they've already made up their minds. They're going to do it anyway. Many things that are proposed to us for our opinions and our impressions, I know what it's about from the get-go. This is you softening us up for the idea; this is you introducing the idea, then repeating it again until it happens whether we agree to it or not.*

What teachers viewed as repeatedly shifting policies and a ceaseless march of poorly planned initiatives was another common topic of resentment.

*You get these new changes every year that don't make any sense. You get the feeling that these administrators were just sitting around and someone said "how about if we do this" and someone else says "that's a great idea" and they just do it. You could see that it's not going to work. Then after a couple of years it's "Oh never mind, we've got something else now."*

One teacher recalled the myriad of reforms she had cycled through:

*They keep on getting on the bandwagon of these big ideas, but the implementation is just not there. We've gone from site-based management, to total quality*

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*management, now we're very data based. They have no idea of what we teachers actually do, they haven't been in the classroom for years and years.*

And a teacher in another district said:

*We never have any time to get good at anything, everything always changes. One year we're going to focus on this; oh you're getting good at it? Let's change it.*

Concerns about district politics and fears of retaliation for speaking out or not “playing by the rules” were also common. In the 1993 study, when teachers talked about their reluctance to voice their misgivings about educational and school policies to district leaders, we pressed them: “with tenure assuring your jobs, what danger are you in by speaking out?” One teacher responded by saying, “Even though we have tenure and all, if you say something, you could be teaching in the basement. . . . You have to be careful of what you say and who you say it to.” In 2013, a typical comment from a teacher evoked the same theme:

*We can talk to [the] central office, but a lot of teachers are fearful that if they really share their true opinion they could get fired or their lives would be made so miserable that they would leave. I feel we are on the ledge all the time. And you make one false step and they will push you off.*

### **An Open Door Policy Leads to More Skepticism**

In the four districts we studied, local school leaders had made a variety of attempts to improve teacher-central office communications. As the schools adopted public engagement and community outreach techniques, they took on more communication leadership to win over the key constituents in their communities and among the district stakeholders and staff. In some schools, the role of the communications staff has become central to the organization. When it's not, it's because the superintendents themselves have embraced

the role. This is what one superintendent told us:

*I go out to every building every month, and I have an open meeting. I have a teacher focus group every month that I just bounce ideas past. We have standing student focus groups, too, that I run every month. Because you've got to have feedback groups. You've got to have structures. I have evening hours every Monday night, no appointments necessary, anybody can come in—office is open. Staff stop by because they figure, “I know he's there, and I'm going to go bend his ear.”*

But these efforts—well-intentioned as they might be—are often met with skepticism. This is how a teacher who works for the same superintendent described communication with him:

*The superintendent will just smile and say everything's just great and we'll take care of that. It's false reassurance. You want to trust so much, but you're going to be out there hanging. I went to talk with him once; it took all my courage to do it. He just patted me on the back and said “it will all work out,” and just left me dangling. Nothing was done.*

### **Attempts at Engagement Go Awry**

Alienated by bitter experiences in the past, teachers' anger and estrangement can run deep. Even sincere attempts to involve classroom teachers can suffer from a legacy of distrust. In some cases, these failed attempts at engagement merely add to teachers' conviction that their views don't matter.

A couple of our districts had used a strategic planning process to build consensus over direction and vision. Using workshops with teachers and interviews with community leaders and active parents, the process typically became an exercise in formality, and most people recognized it as such. The strategic vision document that emerged was typically vague and quickly forgotten.

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*We did that once. Does anyone remember? They got representatives from each grade and we talked about priorities, and they did the same thing with other schools. The board was in the report too. That's just it—it was just a report.*

### Open Hostilities

In one district, though, the effort to engage teachers dramatically backfired, exposing the central office-teacher divide with very negative consequences. The district's leadership had decided to reach out to teachers to involve them with strategic planning for the district with small break-out sessions and one large meeting of the entire instructional staff. From the start of the effort, teachers

**...these failed attempts at engagement merely add to teachers' conviction that their views don't matter.**

evinced strong skepticism that the exercise was going to matter, or that their views had a chance of being translated into policy. When they were pressed to speak frankly, they finally opened up with anger that had been pent-up for years.

From seemingly minor complaints about the condition of the teachers' lounge, to serious accusations that a high school principal was incompetent, the conversations became quite nasty. What had started as an engagement effort ended with

teachers attacking building administrators by name. The high school principal ended up resigning within a year of the discussion groups; the district superintendent left shortly afterwards as well.

This district's experience was an extreme case, in that resentment had reached a boiling point. More typically, teachers and parents often suspect that outreach techniques are closer to public relations than public engagement. Some play along, mostly because they don't want to cause trouble. Most choose not to participate.

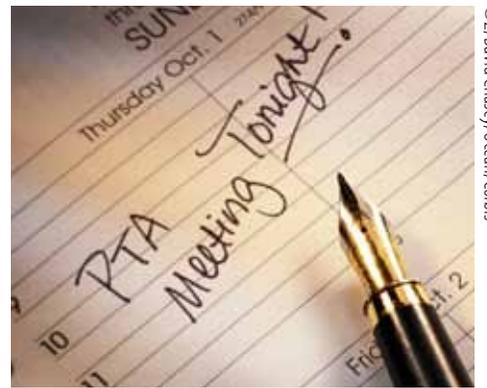
### Implications

Given the highly charged union-district battles in Chicago, Wisconsin, and elsewhere, some might assume that local teachers' unions or associations were behind these strained relations, or were continually aggravating them. But only one of our districts had a very active teachers' union, and even in that district management-labor relations had been quiet for the past several years. The teacher-central office divide seems to persist even when organized advocacy is absent. Perhaps most worrisome, when it came to the divide between the central office and frontline teachers, school districts had made virtually no progress. Under these circumstances, it would seem unwise for districts to assume their teachers will implement change with commitment, much less passion.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Peter Drucker, "They're Not Employees, They're People," *Harvard Business Review* (February, 2002), <http://hbr.org/2002/02/theyre-not-employees-theyre-people/ar/1> (accessed May 25, 2014) and Daniel Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation*. New York: Touchstone, 2001.

# Parents and Others As Unreliable Partners



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**Although professional educators generally acknowledge the importance of parents and communities in education, they typically see the schools as the central locale of learning. Moreover, past experiences working with families and communities have led them to see “outside” entities as unreliable partners. For most, their first obligation is to the children. If families and communities can help, great. If not, educators are prepared to go it alone.**

In our interviews, we sought to gauge what roles district leaders see for others in the community in educating youngsters. To what extent do district leaders think of civic groups, such as the Scouts, Little League, and religious institutions—not to mention families—as having a critical role to play? In turn, do leaders of civic organizations and other community groups recognize the roles they play in educating youngsters? What have been the effects of the standards and accountability movement on all of these questions?

## “We Are Mandated to Take the Lead”

Again and again, educators told us that even when it comes to nonacademic goals, they have no choice but to take the lead because they are told to do so; state and federal mandates require the public schools to take charge.

It’s not that the public schools see themselves as the only, or even first, authority responsible for youngsters. For example, virtually all recognize that parents are crucial and, when pressed, educators can come up with other places in a community where education can take place. But on issue after issue, from integration to bullying to obesity, policymakers come to the schools as their first stop—and often only stop—when public policy toward youngsters is in play. One of the most often-heard refrains from educators is that they are expected to be everything to their students, playing the roles of psychologist, social worker, and parent. Indeed, many superin-

tendents are fairly angry about the regulations and “unfunded mandates” state legislatures and federal policymakers seem to keep imposing on their districts. In the words of one superintendent:

*Do you realize I have to weigh each child in this district? Lawmakers, in their wisdom, have decided that we have to record and report their body mass index. We have to deal with social problems—but every time we get a new mandate it’s never funded. And nothing is taken away.*

## “We Are Morally Bound”

But beyond mandates, educators themselves seem to have adopted as their own the notion that the schools are the leading authority responsible for the education of youngsters. They say that even the most obvious competitors for this role—parents—often fall short. The schools thus see themselves as a reliable agent, perfectly placed to handle an expanded list of responsibilities—after all, virtually all kids walk through their doors—and believe it is appropriate for them to act as such.

One teacher’s comments were typical:

*I always tell my parents “you are your child’s first teacher.” But they don’t do it, they’re not teaching [them]; they put [them] in front of television, doing video games. We’re teaching honesty, responsibility, manners, we provide breakfast in our schools. It’s here already. Language my*

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*kids use is not acceptable in my classroom, but their mom and dad use it all the time. It's shocking to them that it's not acceptable. We teach them what's appropriate and not appropriate in the school environment. We have to teach that, otherwise there's no common standard for all students.*

One superintendent believed that the schools made a mistake many years ago when they said yes and agreed to be the venue for solving these social problems.

*We should have pushed back and said "we are responsible for academics, for teaching kids things that only we can teach them." The more we started taking responsibility for feeding kids, for resolving social problems, the more distracted we got from our core mission. And organizations are not going to be good when they try to do everything. They need to focus.*

But this was an unusual perspective, and even the superintendent quoted above was not suggesting that the needle could be turned back. The viewpoint of another superintendent was more typical:

*A lot of parents are not going to be there for their kids. Some of them are working, struggling. Some of them are just not there. We have a moral obligation to do the job. We are part of the community, and it is our responsibility. When all else fails, who else is going to do it?*

### **Parents as Supporting Cast**

It is easiest for educators to see groups and organizations in their community as sources of support for their work, supplementing the central role of the schools. It was a stretch for educators to see what roles other groups and organizations in the community could play in education. Even parents were assessed to have a spotty record when it came to their children's education—sometimes overwhelmed by work and their own challenges, other times only too quick to demand

the schools teach things that had been traditionally taught at home. In fact, district superintendents were most likely to call parents to task over failures to do their part in the education of youngsters:

*We provide breakfast and lunch during the summer. Did we have to solve the problem right away or should we have gone back to the parents and work with them to handle the problem? But if we hadn't taken care of it they would have gone hungry.*

*The more you take responsibility for something the more it becomes your responsibility and the less it becomes the other person's responsibility until they become dependent on you. But the government is providing us with the free breakfast and lunch because of the paperwork people fill out. So in a way that was taken out of our hands because the government says these are the people in your district in need and this is who you will serve.*

### **Accountability Puts the Focus on Schools Rather than Communities**

The educators we interviewed—the teachers, principals, and superintendents—were clear that the trend was to put more responsibility for education on the public schools. The standards and accountability movement has only accelerated that trend. More than ever, educators felt that the public schools are in the spotlight; their state test scores are the go-to measure of quality and school ratings are ubiquitous. Conversations on how to improve education are most typically about how to improve teaching *in the schools*, not at home or out in the community.

Teachers are the one group most likely to object to this dynamic because they are most likely to feel unfairly judged about what their students learn. They reminded us again and again that forces outside the classroom determine so much of what students are able to learn. In the words of one teacher,

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

Educators often express indifference and even disdain for standardized testing and state ratings of schools, and many who we interviewed for this study shared this disdain. Teachers were especially likely to do so. As one teacher said:

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

The district superintendents we interviewed were more comfortable with assessments than teachers, perhaps because they saw it as a tool for managing staff.

*What gets measured gets done. Until it gets measured, it doesn't get done. I implemented assessments ahead of state requirements for the shock value, and if we're going to do right by kids, we gotta start working on it now. If I don't measure it, it's not going to be done with fidelity.*

## Shopping by Numbers

Even when they discount the meaningfulness of tests, educators, community leaders, and active parents all know what the ratings are and refer to test scores as indicators of the district's success. One direct consequence of the standards movement is that it heightened a consumerist mentality toward education among a certain segment of parents that were wealthier and more mobile. Active parents use test scores and ratings in much the same way as alert consumers use product reviews: to screen for acceptable districts when

shopping for a place to live. One principal said:

*There's an influx of people that are looking to our district, they find us by looking at the Internet. Our neighbors specifically moved in from Florida because of our test scores, they were looking for housing, for what you pay [per] square foot and the education you get. They were thrilled about how much house they could get for such a good quality district. I know my neighbor did her Internet research.*

In a focus group with parents in one affluent suburban district, most were explicit about the calculations they had made. They went searching—usually starting with the Internet—for high-

performing school districts within commuting distance of their corporate office, compared the property taxes to the cost of private school tuition, considered the size of the house they would get, and narrowed down their choices by interviewing district

officials and comparison shopping with real estate brokers. Asked what would happen if their schools' performance took a turn for the worse, most did not hesitate: they would quickly consider selling their homes and leaving the community. In the most concrete sense, school performance meant test scores, but being a consumer meant looking at other indicators as well.

*I shopped. We moved out here, we could have lived anywhere. I looked at test scores, I talked to the superintendent. My daughter wasn't even in school yet. I visited several of the elementary schools. I'm the consumer, I get to check.*

**The district superintendents we interviewed were more comfortable with assessments than teachers, perhaps because they saw it as a tool for managing staff.**

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## The World Outside Waits to Hear the Score

In this study, we also interviewed business and real estate professionals, typically those selected by the district because of their involvement with the schools. These community leaders were also prone to tout their districts' test scores, especially when those scores were good. The scores were a quick, concrete way to signal success. And educators are starting to see companies use their schools' performance on state tests and ratings when they decide whether or not to collaborate. This principal, whose school was high achieving on state tests, found it made her life easier:

*It makes it easier for outside partnerships to develop. If we want to do something innovative with a foundation or a corporation, you have to perform at the standard. Then you get more access to outside partnerships, internships. This business was not going to invite students in or invest more money and time until we performed.*

Standards have heightened divisions among schools, and between teachers and central office administrators within schools. In one district, during a yearly convocation of all educators, one school's team was asked to stand up and be recognized by the superintendent for achieving excellence on the state benchmarks. The teachers of the school later remarked that they wished that hadn't happened; they were already experiencing resentment and taunts from their colleagues at other schools. In another district, when a school slipped one grade from its previous year's ranking, the principal and the teachers could talk of nothing else. Said the principal:

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

Another principal was blunt about the competitive dynamic that test scores had helped to provoke:

*The competitiveness. We don't want to lose kids to other districts. If your scores are in the tank then parents who care about education are going to get the heck out and go somewhere else. Even within the district, what are you doing to keep kids in your building?*

Efforts to improve test scores, standardize classroom instruction, or measure teacher effectiveness can also routinely lead to tension between front-line teachers and district leaders. When the analysis of test scores showed that one teacher was making excellent progress in teaching language arts to ADHD kids, it became her niche calling. Her passion was mathematics instruction, but she would not be given a chance to work in that area. Her husband only half jokingly suggested that if she created a bad year with her students' test scores she might be given the chance to teach what she wanted to teach.

## Implications

It was difficult for the educators we interviewed to conceive of education as a broad, community-wide enterprise. Nor were civic and political leaders any more likely to adopt this vision. Some of this was merely semantic confusion between the terms "education" and "schooling." In the research, we took care to surmount this by explicitly broadening the term *education* beyond academics. And with a broadened definition of education, most of the educators we interviewed acknowledged that when it comes to character, work habits, and social dispositions, children learn from families, adults, and organizations outside of school. But it also was nevertheless clear that educators believed that they and the public schools would be the ones ultimately held responsible.

Compared to our work in 1993, the standards and

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accountability movement seems to have accelerated the dynamic of seeing schools to be singularly responsible for education. The conviction that schools are where education takes place has hardened, as policymakers, parents,

community groups—and educators themselves—pay increasing attention to school ratings, curriculum reforms, and test results. The conversation is mostly about what the schools are doing.

# Schools in Community Relationships: Or, Trust Matters



**The ability of districts to solve problems and garner community support for education can vary considerably. For some, the school-community relationship is satisfactory and even occasionally positive. For others, tension and power struggles appear to be a constant. Resentment built up over time repeatedly derails current problem solving. There simply is no reservoir of trust to draw on.**

**One of the observations we made** in conducting the four case studies was that the quality and depth of relations among the school professionals and other organizations and institutions in the district—the business organizations, the local government agencies, the civic groups—varied widely. And it seemed that this mattered greatly.

If school administrators and others in the district had constructive ways of relating, they were able to collaborate over initiatives and share resources and skills. But when the district's relationships were weak or tainted, there was little cooperation and sometimes even competition or suspicion. The tenor of resentment and suspicion or trust and cooperation were defined by critical episodes and actions in the past; relationships evolve over time.

## **When Relationships Work Well**

In one district, cooperation among leadership circles—specifically, the schools, the city government, and the business community—had evolved to an unusually high and intimate level. As such, these relationships demonstrate the powerful benefits that can be had when the reflex is trust rather than suspicion. For example, when the local economic development association was courting new companies to relocate their operations, they would routinely bring district representatives along to make presentations. The development agency reasoned

that the quality of the local public schools could influence the company's decision; this level of cooperation signified that things get done. The same district had its school cameras hooked to local fire and law enforcement offices so that in an emergency a live video feed could guide the actions of first responders. Perhaps the most unusual example of intimacy was that this school district loaned the city money to pave a road. Similarly, when the city encouraged the building of a sports arena and a stadium funded by easement and tax abatements, it insisted that the developers give the district's sports teams and graduating classes free access in exchange. In the city manager's words, "What's good for the schools is good for the city."

The relationships among the leading institutions in this community had become a source of pride for long-time residents. One active parent summed it up:

*Through the years there's been a great cooperation between the city, the school, even the fire department. We have a great leader in the city manager, the mayor, and the superintendent—they've all, through the years, had such great cooperation. I think that's one of the greatest things in our community . . . because we have built partnerships between the city and the school district and the county, and I'm kind of shocked to learn that in other*

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*areas . . . there's absolutely no cooperation between cities and school districts.*

Still, even in this district other relationships floundered. For example, the central office-teacher divide was at least as strong here as in the other districts. Most tellingly, the imminent departure of its long-serving and highly regarded superintendent had put the district on edge as fears mounted that their oasis of growth and cooperation could be overrun by the political troubles so common among neighboring districts. The fear was that the departure of one key player could jeopardize the cooperation and trust built among the circles of leadership over decades.

### **A Genuine Attempt at Dialogue**

As indicated earlier, some of the four districts had made concerted attempts to broaden community engagement and share responsibility and decision making about local schools. One had launched a very different and unusual type of public engagement effort that was not directed toward a predetermined outcome preferred by leadership. In this case, the district's single high school had become overcrowded and something had to be done. Build another building? Break up the school into campuses within several buildings, each with its own theme? There were concerns that the community would divide when the high school divided, one building for one population segment and the other for another segment. Active parents and teachers interviewed after the fact described the process: The district leadership initiated a series of town meetings that offered different approaches, each with upsides and downsides; turnout was robust; and the discussions were productive and not dominated by groups with special interests. Just as impressively, the leadership took guidance from those meetings rather than using them to advocate its favored approach to the problem. By all accounts, the solution—

the creation of several academies with different themes in the same building—was a popular and stable one.

Why was a public engagement process used in these circumstances? In the superintendent's own words he "wasn't sure what to do" about the high school—he hadn't come to resolution on the best course of action. Yet this very same superintendent had adopted a much more top-down approach on other issues—in cases where he and the school board knew what they wanted to do. If he and his board had arrived at a solution, this school leader explained, their remaining task would have been to sell the community on the approach and anticipate and work through any backlash.

**The departure of one key player could jeopardize the cooperation and trust built among the circles of leadership.**

### **When Relationships Are Troubled**

In some communities, local politics are so venomous and relationships so fractured that even minor problem solving is undercut. One district we visited was the site of repeated squabbles and recurring tension between school leaders and local government. The constant bickering had produced grudges that derailed even the most practical and benign of solutions.

In this community, residents complained at council meetings that the yellow school buses were blocking traffic and damaging lesser roads with their weight during the winter months. For its part, the district had a hard time getting a response from the local agency responsible for plowing snow, so that its buses could make it through choke points. And when city officials floated the idea of giving local residents access to one of the district's sports fields when the schools

were not using them, the district was in no mood to cooperate. The reason? When the field was having drainage problems, the city's parks department refused a request for help from the school leaders.

Another district had a different problem. Its

**Critical episodes in a district's history seem to at least partly define the relationship between the district and local actors in the community.**

leadership initiated an effort to energize its relationship with the local government, but the effort was stymied by political divisions between the city council and the mayor. The district's initiative to build collaboration could not get past the gridlock, even though the political

problems did not originate with the school district.

*When I became superintendent there was no relationship between the city and the district. There was a huge dysfunction between the mayor and the council. There was always this infighting going on between the two entities. We had a committee set up with the city council, and the whole point was to look at shared services, and we have a lot of ideas. The most that came out of that is we started sharing supplies. OK, there's a savings there, but we never got to the meaty stuff. I was very frustrated with that.*

### Why Isn't Cooperation More Commonplace?

On the surface, there's all the motivation in the world for school districts and their community institutions to cooperate. Come time for levy votes, districts can benefit from the support of the business community or of the local city council. Businesses benefit when the schools in their locale have a reputation for success; it becomes easier to

recruit new employees and businesses, the tax base is stronger, and the schools can graduate good workers. As for local government, the schools are often the cornerstone of community identity and growth—witness the impact of school sports teams. And, of course, many people—taxpayers—choose their homes according to the quality of the public schools. One parent talked about the connection between the schools and the community in this way:

*If the lake is polluted and poorly taken care of, it affects everybody. If the school is poorly performing and not getting the money it needs, all the property values go down. When the schools do well the community does well.*

Given the positive outcomes, why wasn't it more commonplace to find high levels of cooperation within the communities we studied? We sought to understand the origins of different levels of cooperation or distrust.

### Critical Episodes That Define Relationships

Through our interviews, we learned that critical episodes in a district's history seem to at least partly define the relationship between the district and local actors in the community. These events can set a positive or negative tone for that relationship, even after many years pass and even after the personalities originally involved leave the scene.

For example, in one of the districts, endemic distrust and competition characterized relations between the city council and school district. Virtually no one could explain it until a long-serving board member revealed that some 30 years earlier, the school board reneged on its promise to the city council to change a policy affecting the high school. The town had gone to some expense to build a road to the building based on that promise. After several years of negotiations and threats of litigation, the matter was dropped but not forgotten. "I told the other members we can be sued for this," the board

member recalled. “How can we work with these people in the future? But a couple of the people that were part of the original deal were no longer on the board. They didn’t listen to me. We kept resubmitting the proposal but it never got approved.” The incident created a layer of distrust and suspicion that colored all the district’s future interactions with the city council and mayor’s office. Several superintendents had come and gone and the elected officials involved were no longer serving, but the relationship between the district and the city had not been repaired.

A very different and positive example of a defining historical moment occurred in another district. Here, the city manager helped create a commercial development zone that automatically funneled increased tax values to the school district, giving the district a tremendous and freestanding source of revenue that was independent of residential property taxes. As the value of the commercial property went up, the district kept the gains in tax revenues. The financial gains to the district were enormous and ongoing. The same can be said for the good will and trust the action generated—it was enormous and ongoing. As described by the city manager:

*The school district at first did not understand what we were doing for them. We said, “we’ve found a vehicle that may help you because we know you’re going to grow and have to build lots of buildings. The tax gains are going to be protected from having to be shared with the state.” It has literally pumped hundreds of millions of dollars into the district. We thought it would benefit the city in the future a whole lot more. I’d like to say that we were smart enough, but basically we were doing it more than anything else as a favor to the school district. It started out that way, and the city and the school district have done a number of joint projects on the tariff’s money and it’s taken on a life of its own.*

## Geographic and Political Boundaries

Geographic boundaries, economic conditions, and political jurisdictions are other complicating factors, sometimes limiting the scope and type of district-community relationships.

For example, none of the four school districts in this study had boundaries that exactly corresponded to those of their local governments. The way district lines were drawn meant that some of the families the schools served were residents of different locales. As a result, the district would sometimes be torn; and allegiances would sometimes be questioned. Expenditures by the major town for something benefitting the schools would end up paying for services for students living in other locales (for example, reworking a sewage line). Names mattered and took on a symbolic significance—would the name of the school or sports team evoke the city? Would the district’s name? And behind these questions were deeper ones. Whose schools and whose kids are these? To which community do they belong? Things sometimes got really confusing for one of our districts because it drew students from three different towns.

When districts and local governments have shared jurisdiction over the same land, taxpayers’ friction and competition in politics can result. For example, the city council in one district considered—but voted down—a tax increase after members took the stand that taxpayers were already overburdened. Shortly afterward, the school district

**The way district lines were drawn meant that some of the families the schools served were residents of different locales. As a result, the district would sometimes be torn.**

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decided to go to the voters for approval of a levy increase. Most of the council members withheld their support and some publicly opposed it. Although the mayor privately confided to the superintendent that the district needed the levy, he publicly supported it only after it was voted down twice. Voters finally passed a more limited levy increase. By then, some council members were resentful over what they saw as a lack of coordination and “common message” in the appeals to citizens. Meanwhile, many teachers and parents were resentful of the city council for not supporting their cause.

### **When Businesses Deal with the Schools**

In our districts, companies and business associations, such as chambers of commerce, were involved in the schools—and in education—through a range of activities: financial support through donations of money or goods and services; political support during a levy vote; educational involvement, such as mentoring and apprenticeship programs; and even curricular programming. In one district, the local chamber of commerce developed a course to teach entrepreneurship to high schoolers, where students learned to take a product from invention to marketing and distribution. The course needed the approval and collaboration of the district’s central office. In another, a technology company lent its scientists to work with a team of students to develop a robot that competed in a statewide competition. In another, the local design and print company donated its services to the school district’s campaign to get a levy passed.

In many cases, cooperation with the district was at least partly motivated by the fact that the schools are a customer, a significant economic player in the area. When the owner of a large pizzeria donates food to a fundraising event, as happened in one of our districts, he is also strengthening relations with a good customer. And sometimes the school

provides a valuable service to the company, as when a video production program in one district’s technical training center produced video clips for a local sports franchise while the students got to apply work skills to the real world economy. One school district routinely dispatched its students to help at the local food pantry—a lesson in public service and social responsibility—while its teachers volunteered along with students at clothing donation centers in low-income neighborhoods.

Virtually all of the efforts we heard about in our interviews worked under the district’s aegis in some fashion, but the schools were the hub. Moreover, most of these activities were initiated by the public schools themselves.

### **Is There Anyone to Work With?**

Naturally, the extent to which organized groups even exist in a community can also constrain the extent of collaboration within the school district. For instance, in at least one of our districts there was no substantial business presence; it was a suburban bedroom community with no active, coordinating business association and no commercial industry. The most visible economic force came from the real estate agencies. As a result, the district had less to work with.

But more appears to be at play than the number of institutions in a community. We saw that when leaders and organizations bring an attitudinal orientation that looks for connections and areas of cooperation, they find partners. Indeed, in one community the district’s superintendent was pushing businesses to organize and become active because he believed the schools would benefit from a politically active business community. In another district, the pastor of one of the largest churches in the community reached out to the neediest high school and built a food bank program, despite the reservations of the central office. On the other hand, another district had the headquarters of a major national corporation

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within its borders, but there was virtually no contact—much less a relationship—between the two organizations.

The sensibilities of leaders of key institutions matter. When their approach is to consciously expand the circle of connections and to build relationships, partnerships are more likely to emerge. When these sensibilities are missing, the schools are more likely to be set apart from their communities.

### **Final Thoughts**

Although a lot has changed in American education over the past two decades, the key dilemmas identified in our 1993 study persist—and may have intensified. Divisions among district stakeholders show no signs of abating. This is true despite the advent of public engagement strategies in education. And rather than helping, the explosive growth of communication technology and outreach techniques seems to have created more ways for people to say the wrong thing. The distance between school districts and their communities also shows no sign of diminishing. Instead, new technology and techniques appear to have created more opportunities for miscommunication, disappointment, and even hostility.

For its part, the rise of the standards and accountability movement has strengthened pre-existing tendencies to view the public schools as the central lever for educating

youngsters. As a result of the heightened scrutiny of education professionals, the stress on stakeholder relationships within districts has increased. The tendency of educators and community groups to see the schools as institutions standing apart from the community, even as they occupy the same geographical space, has grown.

Even as advocates for education reform press ahead with new initiatives, they may want to be mindful of what happens when those initiatives hit communities. From teacher evaluation systems that rely on standardized tests to Common Core State Standards, charter schools, or school funding reforms, no plan can avoid the political vortex in school districts and its consequences. The quality of the relationships among district stakeholders, the quality of a district's relationship to its community, and whether there is a legacy of cooperation or one of mistrust, will always matter.

The consensus is that our national politics are riven by the dominance of harsh partisanship and dysfunctional relationships across our governing institutions. The politics of local school districts can have the same feel. Good ideas matter. But progress cannot be made until reform advocates do a far better job of anticipating and working through the challenges waiting for them on the ground.



## Addendum: Methodology

**This is a small-scale qualitative study**, looking at the milieu of public education reform in four districts of different types in different parts of the country. It is an update of a 1993 study by the Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda entitled *Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts*. We thought it would be enlightening to revisit some of the issues uncovered in that first study, and to ask some new questions as well, by again examining the lives of four school districts. We used the same research techniques, spending several days in each district. In each, we conducted one focus group with teachers and another with active parents; interviews or focus groups with school principals, district superintendents, and board members; and interviews or focus groups with civic, political, and business leaders in the community. More than 100 people were interviewed in person from 2012 to 2013. In developing the research and analyzing the results we also drew upon what we have learned in twenty-plus years of working with school districts and on education policy issues. The strength of the case-study method is that it affords an in-depth look at how districts work in the real world, capturing insights and stories from multiple vantage points

and portraying relationships and events through the eyes of different actors. The principle weakness is that it is inappropriate to conclude from the research that observations and analysis will be generally valid, in this case, across districts throughout the country. We tried to obviate some of this weakness by conducting four case studies and by paying closest attention to themes and story lines that consistently emerged across the districts.

Just as in 1993, we also picked selected districts with an eye toward geographic and demographic diversity (such as size, income, locale). A quick snapshot of the four districts: The smallest served fewer than 1,000 students, the largest over 70,000. One was in the Northeast, two were in the Midwest, and one was in the South. One district was in a large city, another in a small city, and two were suburban. One district served mostly minority students, two mostly white, and one was mixed. One district served mostly low-income families, two were mostly middle class, and one was mostly affluent. They all had typical governance models in that they were led by a superintendent and elected school board members. One district was in a community that had charter schools.



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