Accomplishing Reform
With Public Engagement:
A Map of the Process

Preliminary Observations from Public Agenda
Prepared in Collaboration with
The Kettering Foundation

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Founded in 1975 by public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for its extensive citizen education work. Its citizen education materials -- used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country -- have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision-makers across the political spectrum.
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Introduction

This "map" addresses citizens and community groups who want to undertake reform but believe that the public should or needs to be their partner for real change to occur. It flags roadblocks a community might encounter as it tries to solve problems with the public's help. Those trying to achieve change can use this map to anticipate some of the problems they may face as they try to engage the public in their effort.

Many efforts at reform do not seek out the public: their strategy is to influence leadership, or enact specific laws. And many efforts at reform do not require the public's involvement: they focus on highly technical government programs or the restructuring of organizations—issues which do not require public input and illicit very little interest on the part of the average citizen. However, there are reforms that require citizens to change longstanding habits or to make new sacrifices, that ask for lasting changes and commitments, and that effect people's personal lives and daily actions. The success of these efforts may well be predicated upon whether—and how well—the public is engaged. Communities undertaking reforms that require public 'buy in' might need advice and forewarning about typical problems they might face since conventional notions of politics and problem solving usually ignore or pay little more than lip service to community involvement and public engagement. This map will attempt to outline the pitfalls, detours and resistances to involving the public.

These thoughts on the process of reform are based on Public Agenda's approach to public engagement, its research on public attitudes toward education reform, and its work in spearheading and organizing citizen education campaigns in communities and states. These campaigns focused on such issues as education and the workforce, health care and the environment. Part of their mission was to establish or cement relationships among diverse groups in the community and help them work together toward common goals. In addition, this map draws heavily upon the Kettering Foundation's unique perspective to public problem solving and education reform, as well as research it has conducted or sponsored.

A Map of the Reform Process

Reform efforts deal with many different issues and are launched in different types of communities. All communities and issues are to some extent unique, but they do encounter similar stages and pitfalls during a reform's development and implementation. This map lays out the reform process, identifying the stages that reforms may go through, across issues and across communities. Although it does not describe what determines a "good solution", it does offer a sense of what a good public engagement approach to solutions would look like.
1. **Taking Stock: The Context of The Reform Process**

Here are some initial questions to put the process of reform in context:

1. *How do leaders in the community see the public?* Leaders often approach the public by asking “How can we get the public to agree to the solutions we know are necessary?” This may work when the public has little prior interest in the issue, when no sacrifices or changes will be expected of the public, and when the solutions do not contradict the public’s own priorities. However, this approach becomes appreciably more difficult to sustain when dealing with education, health care, race relations, or the criminal justice system—to name just a few—where the public has deeply-held interests, priorities, preferences and fears. Under these circumstances, leaders who expect the public to simply accept their solution are probably in for disappointment. The assumption underlying this map is that for reform to succeed and to last, citizen involvement in setting the agenda, in considering the issues, in supporting the goals of the effort and even in helping to implement the solution is critical. Taking this perspective means that ordinary citizens must actively engage the issue at hand, must change or make explicit their attitudes on the issue, and must even change their behavior. It also requires a shift on the part of experts and leaders from a conception of the public as a ‘force to be molded’ to a conception of the public as a partner that needs to be engaged and listened to.

2. *Where is the public on this issue?* The public may not even be aware that a problem exists. Any discussion or communication with the public on an issue that is not yet on their agenda risks irrelevance if it begins with solutions and detailed proposals. Alternatively, the public’s concern toward the issue may be high but its agenda and priorities may be different from leaders. A case in point is education reform, where leaders are typically concerned with governance issues, technology, teaching methods and standards while the public is first interested in guaranteeing that schools maintain order, safety and teach the basics. The public is often unwilling to make additional sacrifices on behalf of education reforms when these reforms ignore or even contradict its own views on what needs to get done. The public’s resistance to additional sacrifices might be braced by its suspicion that any further expenditures would amount to throwing “good money after bad.” The public may also resist additional sacrifices if it is convinced the problem can be fixed with painless measures (for example, controlling health care costs by eliminating waste, fraud and abuse).

When these conditions prevail, education campaigns that feature leaders transmitting “correct” information via the mass media for a limited duration may not work. To progress beyond wishful thinking people need to confront their resistances and then do “choicework”—deliberate over alternative policy choices, consider tradeoffs and weigh their pros
nonpartisan communication effort on behalf of education. The association assumed that the chamber’s support of the effort meant the reform was “out to get teachers”.

To answer these questions, listening is critical. The perspectives of various community leaders representing diverse points of view, and the perspectives of different segments of the public, should be aired. The methods and format for airing these perspectives can vary. People can be given the opportunity to talk, write, meet, or even respond to surveys. Discussions can take place with individuals, or in small or large group meetings; they can be conducted by professional moderators or trained volunteers; they can take place in “neutral” public sites or people’s homes. But this phase must be part of an ongoing process of communication, even after answers to these initial questions have been established.

Some Specific Problems That Might Arise:

How does the community deal with:

• The excluded members of a community—those who are often not invited to get involved; those typically forgotten or excluded. How do you become conscious of these voices and how do you actually bring them along? Citizens engaged in reform efforts often neglect untapped community resources, especially when things are proceeding smoothly. The disadvantage to this is when setbacks occur there may be few reserves to call upon. For example, senior citizens and civic organizations are often perceived to have little interest in the well-being of the schools and are often overlooked by traditional education reformers. However, many are very interested in the issue, and would contribute if given a way to do so.

• The skeptics—those who have seen past reform efforts come and go. Will the community motivate fatigued citizens to have one more go at it? Many are cynical because of past negative experiences with reform attempts in politics, education, and other areas. In education, this is especially true for many teachers who have seen many reforms come and go while conditions in their schools remain the same.

• The free-riders—those who will want to tag along, hoping for gain without effort. Many are prone to inaction, and static inertia is their primary “response.” How will the community move the fence-sitters and the inactives?

• The single-issue partisans—those whose involvement will be driven by narrowly-defined interests which they will pursue intensely.

• The community leaders who think they are the public and would like to speak on its behalf.
Some will want to see action and results right away, while others will be more comfortable talking and planning. In education reform, for example, the people who emphasize quick results are often driven by electoral pressures (e.g. state legislators or school board members), limited tenure (e.g. superintendents or education consultants), or limited patience (e.g. foundations or business executives). The emphasis on getting something done quickly and on implementing solutions that have lasting impact could override the public engagement process. The opposite tendency—a focus on “talking for the sake of talking” and consensus-building to the exclusion of action—may also endanger reform.
People check the issue off their list because one piece of legislation, or other small step in the process, has been accomplished. They mistake policy pronouncements or changes in laws for real change. One community thought that passing an education reform package meant it had solved its school problems. Several years later it realized it had only started the process of change.

The community fails to monitor and evaluate the implementation of proposals, thinking that mere formal assent, pronouncements and decrees of new policies mean things have actually changed. Actually, elements in the community resistant to change might be simply resorting to a waiting game, a diversion game, or a lip-service game. For example, although the school board, teachers' union and superintendent of one community signed an agreement to change how teachers teach, front-line teachers never accepted the changes and continued to teach much the same way they had before the agreement.

Reformers become so wedded to their plans that their own programs become entrenched—the imperatives, rules and operating procedures of the programs become more important than the original goals of the reform. An administrative structure designed to implement the program can easily end up defending the status quo, even though yesterday it was dedicated to change. Challengers and skeptics are then dismissed and labelled as heretics. When the superintendent of one school district concluded that site-based management could help the performance of his district's schools, implementation of site-based management became the way for many principles and assistant administrators to rise through administrative ranks. Student performance was an afterthought.

B. Getting Back on Track

Communities that succeed in making real change will continually:

- Look to widen involvement and expand engagement. This builds a reservoir of support to get the community through the difficult times. Widening involvement may be especially difficult to do as the reform matures but often this is when it is most important to pursue. Keep experts and professionals reaching out to newcomers and maintaining public involvement, especially when others drop out.

- Think in terms of a much longer time frame—years to a decade—without neglecting short-term goals. Many business executives who came to education reform movements thinking they could solve the problem within a year adjusted these expectations.

- Think of the change as something that comes from and affects all segments of the community, from groups traditionally interested in the issue to "outsiders".
IV. Attitudes Begin to Change

A. Signs of Change

Reforms that are on track eventually see changes in the attitudes of community members. These fundamental shifts are much more significant than superficial (and perhaps temporary) changes in procedures of institutions. Changed attitudes often endure when procedural adjustments fall by the wayside. The sort of changes discussed in this map stem from widespread and enduring changes in public attitudes: the issue’s salience rises, attitudes toward it become relatively stable, tradeoffs are acknowledged and people express commitment to action. People and organizations who were thought to be uninterested or not useful for change to occur are now interested and involved. And people and organizations that did not work together in the past—or did not work together well—are now doing so. If changes in policies and institutions are to endure they must be rooted in community attitudes and support.

These are some of the attitude shifts that will be apparent. These are, perhaps, road signs indicating that a community is nearing its destination.

- The community no longer expects the professionals to do the work alone. The tasks are not delegated to a single institution. Parents, business leaders and others no longer say “why are the schools not doing their job?” but say “why aren’t we doing our job?”
- The institutions in charge of implementing policies are an integral part of the community. The professionals themselves are not—and do not perceive themselves to be—isolated from the community.
- Long-standing critics and skeptics are no longer outraged customers but rather long-term players in the effort at every level—participating, providing resources, supporting and encouraging reform. For example, taxpayers, senior citizens and business leaders want to see education reform and are willing to help accomplish it.
- Traditional professionals no longer resent criticism, dismiss calls for improvement, suspect the community concerns, consider themselves “experts,” and throw up barriers to any criticism or proposed change. Educators embarking upon curriculum reform for example welcome the viewpoint of business leaders in their community.
- Single-issue groups expand their perspective or at least become less strident and exclusive in tone.
- People without a direct, tangible interest in the issue understand its importance and acknowledge they have a role to play. Processes and institutions have been created that allow them to play that role. For instance, a senior citizen who wants to contribute to the schools has a way to “plug into the system”—a forum or a phone number.
V. Factors to Consider Throughout the Process

Finally, some factors can hinder the process of change at any stage.

Some Potential Problems That Might Arise:

- Some people, groups or organizations will remain staunchly opposed to change, no matter how hard citizens and groups committed to change try to include them in the process. What are the repercussions for ignoring or forgetting these opponents altogether? Should reformers engage this opposition directly?

- Some would-be reformers may be co-opted by the status quo and the institutions they are seeking to change. For example, parents active in education reform may be "bought off" by the schools when special attention is paid to their own children.

- Some people will prefer false peace, avoiding open discussion and glossing over important differences. Some may temporarily hide real concerns and divergent agendas. Eventually, however, these divergent points of view can push their way to the forefront in unpredictable ways and overwhelm the process.

- The lack of vocal opposition to reform in a community might be mistaken as active support when there may actually be no support at all. Reformers who assume they represent their community because no one is complaining may be in for a rude awakening when conflict erupts and they find themselves isolated.

- Some people seek to limit or control involvement with others because they fear the unknown and are uncomfortable with unpredictability. They may prefer to use fear to maintain control when entering situations where they may lose some share or all of their power.

- Objective economic and social conditions can present special challenges, depending upon the community's financial health, the composition and dispersion of its population, and its economic and cultural base.
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