The Human
A world-class education system lies at the heart of the American dream. So says opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich (2011), who explains, "The nation's implicit social contract is that Americans can improve their lot in life through their own hard work and education. This is the promise that holds us together" (p. ix).

Delivering on this promise is the paramount mission of school leaders today. It isn't enough to competently manage the schools we currently have. Teachers, principals, and district administrators are now charged with finding effective ways to teach all students to high levels—including students from economically disadvantaged homes, those with special needs, and those with limited English skills.

It's a tall order for K–12 education. In response to these heightened demands, we've seen tantalizing signs of progress in some schools and districts. But unless leaders do more to help teachers, students, parents, taxpayers, and others grasp the need for change and participate in it, improvement will be spotty and nearly impossible to sustain. That's why the crucial next step in improving K–12 education is unleashing the human factor—transforming these pivotal groups into allies and partners, rather than passive audiences or constituencies to be managed. To take that step, school leaders may need to consider some fresh thinking about the art of propelling change.

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Factor

We can develop better, more practical, more long-lasting education reform if we widen the circle of dialogue to include students, teachers, parents, and community members.

Jean Johnson

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Where We Are: Questions and Concerns

Surveys and focus groups have repeatedly shown that many Americans still have concerns and questions about education reform as it has unfolded over the last decade. Different groups come at education issues from markedly different perspectives. Some are angered and alienated. Here are a few of the most worrying examples.

Boosting academic standards. Many educators see the new, more challenging Common Core standards as a remarkable breakthrough in U.S. education. But are parents fully on board? Not according to a recent Public Agenda survey. Just 50 percent of parents with children now in public schools want their child to take harder classes, 47 percent say their own child works hard enough as it is, and the school does not need to make classes more difficult (Public Agenda, 2011a).
Math and science. Leaders in business, government, and higher education assert that our economy needs more high school graduates with top skills in math and science. On the surface, at least, most Americans seem to agree. But dig deeper, and a different picture emerges. Fewer than half of parents say the schools their children attend should put more emphasis on advanced subjects like calculus and physics. Nearly two-thirds of parents (and even more members of the general public) say teaching science can wait until middle school or high school—definitely not the career preparation most working scientists would recommend (Johnson, Rochkind, & Ott, 2009).

Few people change their expectations or behavior on the basis of information alone.

Most teachers see standardized tests as an inexact and partial measure of student learning at best. According to Public Agenda research, only about 1 in 10 teachers consider student scores on district tests an excellent way to judge student learning (Public Agenda & AIR, 2009). In a study by the Gates Foundation, 60 percent of teachers said that student engagement was a “very accurate” measure of a teacher’s performance, but just 7 percent said the same about student scores on standardized tests (Scholastic & the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010).

Teaching. To improve teacher performance, states and districts nationwide are reexamining decades-old policies on teacher pay and evaluation and reenvisioning how teachers and principals work together. The focus on teacher effectiveness is long overdue, but the substance, tone, and pace of these changes have ruffled many teachers. Public Agenda research has repeatedly shown that majorities of teachers of all ages and levels of experience are worried that new evaluation, compensation, and tenure policies are unreasonable, unrealistic, or poorly executed (Public Agenda & American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2009).

Standardized testing. Schools are increasingly using standardized tests to provide independent measures of student learning and to shed light on classroom teachers’ effectiveness. But the achievement gap, opening with a discussion of the disparities in standardized test scores among minority and white students. In its summary, the foundation wrote:

First, the words “achievement gap” hold almost no meaning for the people with the most at stake: the students, parents, and other residents of communities where the achievement gap is most pronounced. At the start of the forums, many participants didn’t even know what those words meant, much less what could or should be done about the problem. (Kettering Foundation, 2010, p. 1).

Persistently failing schools. The U.S. Department of Education has called on state and local school leaders to act boldly to fix persistently failing schools, and districts around the country have started to close or overhaul these deeply troubled institutions. But rather than being greeted as courageous reformers striving to improve student learning, district officials often encounter angry community pushback. Public Agenda research has found that parents in neighborhoods with low-performing schools typically see school closings as a defeat and failure for their community. Many are not convinced that school officials really have their children’s best interests at heart (see Public Agenda, 2011b, 2012).

Where We Need to Go: Partnership and Progress

Being a school leader has never been for the faint of heart, and handling opposition is part of the job. But the
concerns, miscommunications, and gaps in understanding outlined above make it supremely difficult to embed and sustain reforms. Unless teachers, parents, students, and community members become allies and partners in the mission of improving schools, the United States will likely stumble in its efforts to build a world-class education system. Trying to make people do things differently rarely succeeds. Progress comes when people recognize the need for change and believe that they themselves can play an essential part.

What can school leaders do to build broader support for the changes we must make to improve our schools? Here are four ideas to start with.

**Recognize Communication Gaps and Reach Out**

All school leaders should make sure they have an accurate picture of the attitudes and concerns that parents, teachers, and members of other important groups bring to key issues in school reform. Good opinion research is available from Public Agenda, Education Sector, the Kettering Foundation, and other groups. Some states and districts also conduct surveys on school issues, and these can be helpful as well. Take advantage of everything that’s out there.

But it’s important to remember that what you glean from surveys and focus groups is only a starting point, and conducting research locally is often far too costly for schools and districts. The far more crucial step is to open up new conversations and begin exploring in less formal ways what people think about what’s happening in schools. Talk to people in the neighborhood or at the supermarket. See what Aunt Sally and your teenage nephew think about the remarkable changes afoot in education today. These can be eye-opening conversations.

**Create Dialogue**

Giving people clear, accurate information is essential. But few people change their expectations or behavior on the basis of information alone—especially not in a society where we’re continually inundated with facts, statistics, news, and opinion, not to mention tweets, blogs, and Facebook posts. When it comes to introducing new ideas and beginning the process of change, a more effective strategy may be dialogue (Yankelovich, 2001).

Steve Rosell and Heidi Gantwerk (2011) describe dialogue as “the step we can take, before decisions are made, to uncover assumptions, broaden perspectives, build trust, and find common ground” (p. 112). They contrast debate, a type of discussion most of us know well, with dialogue, a distinctive kind of conversation that informs in a very different way (see fig. 1). In debate, it’s assumed that there is a right answer and that your role is to argue for it. In dialogue, the assumption is that other people also have a piece of the answer and that their views and suggestions will improve the ultimate solution. In debate, the idea is to win the argument; in dialogue, the idea is to look for common ground.

When schools are contemplating and introducing important changes, dialogue serves two important purposes. First, it gives people an opportunity to learn about new challenges, think about new ideas, and have a say in how new programs will be implemented. And for leaders, dialogue provides a basis
of understanding that can help them shape and adapt proposals to serve their schools and communities better.

Invite Teachers to the Table
Over the past few years, Public Agenda and American Institutes for Research (AIR) have begun to launch dialogues with classroom teachers about evaluation, salary, and tenure policies. The project, called Everyone at the Table (www.everyoneatthetable.org), gives school leaders and teachers an opportunity to exchange ideas and insights outside the traditional bargaining process.

These dialogues show powerfully that teachers believe in evaluation and have important and useful ideas on how to do it effectively. Inviting teachers to talk about these issues alleviates tension and helps teachers feel less like victims and more like colleagues. Dialogue can ease some of the mistrust and resentment teachers feel when they believe reforms are being forced on them. And dialogue among school leaders and teachers on these issues conveys the extraordinarily significant message that teachers' views are important and that school leaders want to hear and consider them.

Ask for Help
Most Americans welcome the efforts school leaders are making to improve schools and to ensure that all students gain the knowledge and skills that will enable them to build secure and meaningful lives. In fact, parents and community members in focus groups often emphasize how important and challenging these goals are, and they acknowledge that schools can't accomplish them alone.

Schools need parents and other adults in the community to join them in combating problems like truancy and high dropout rates. Community engagement projects conducted by local school leaders in association with Public Agenda and the Kettering Foundation have demonstrated that asking for help from parents, community organizations, law enforcement personnel, local institutions of higher education, and other groups often yields practical and useful results—partnerships working to increase school attendance and completion, mentors who will spend extra time with students who need extra help, and knowledgeable volunteers who can help graduating seniors make good decisions about college or finding their first real job.

Asking for help also sends a crucial message to the broader public. It demonstrates that school leaders value and respect what the community brings to the table. And in many cases, asking for help and working with individuals and groups outside the school on common goals can help dissolve some of the distrust and miscommunication that bedevils so many school turnaround projects.

Widening the Circle
On the basis of my experience at Public Agenda over the years, I believe that the vast majority of policymakers and school leaders driving education reform have good intentions. They deserve credit for calling attention to the serious inadequacies of U.S. schools and pushing the country to act. But in nearly all cases, they have mainly been talking with one another, not with teachers, parents, students, and communities. The lack of a broader dialogue not only endangers support for the changes we need to make in schools, but also robs education leaders of the knowledge and insights that teachers, parents, and others can offer.

I am convinced that we can develop better, more practical, more long-lasting solutions if we widen the circle of dialogue on education reform. School leaders who reach out to listen to parents, teachers, students, and members of the community with empathy and open-mindedness will make better choices. Even if the ultimate decision runs counter to popular opinion, school leaders who promote and encourage open dialogue are more likely to earn the respect and cooperation of these key groups in the future.
By rebuilding education's essential partnerships, we can unleash the human factor that is vital to improving our schools and helping our students succeed.  

References


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