DIVIDED WITHIN, BESIEGED WITHOUT:

The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts

A Report from the Public Agenda Foundation
Prepared for the Charles F. Kettering Foundation
Divided Within, Besieged Without:
The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts

Principal Researcher and Author
Steve Farkas

With
Jean Johnson

Editors
Deborah Wadsworth
Kathleen Cahill and
Adam Kernan-Schloss of
Kernan-Schloss Associates
Interviews and Focus Groups
Steve Farkas
John Immerwahr
Steve Immerwahr
Ethan Gutmann

Transcription
Meg Svoboda
Janice Kamrin
Mae Shores

Special Assistance
Spence Kramer
Wendy Krantz
Scott Swenson

Formatting
Isaura Simon
The Public Agenda Foundation

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

Please feel free to write or call:

The Public Agenda Foundation
6 East 39th Street
New York, NY 10016
Tel: 212-686-6610
Fax: 212-889-3461

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Whatever worthwhile and illuminating findings this report contains would not have been possible without the individuals named above. Above all, however, nothing could have been learned — and little done — about education in the schools without the cooperation of the many people struggling to educate who shared their stories with us while remaining anonymous.
During the past year, the Public Agenda Foundation has taken an in-depth look at four school districts as each struggles to reform its schools and improve the education it offers to its children. In the process, Public Agenda researchers conducted more than 200 face-to-face interviews — most lasting an hour or more — with teachers, principals, administrators and school board members as well as with parents, business executives and other local citizens who have been active in the schools.

Commissioned by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, this study focuses on the concerns and perspectives of professionals working in the schools on a day-to-day basis, and of citizens who have made a special effort to familiarize themselves with the schools.

By looking closely at the attitudes and relationships of respondents in four school districts, we hoped to shed light on the inner workings of education reform — the clarity of communication, the nature of conflict, the potential for consensus and the likelihood of change.

We are discouraged by what we found. In each district, what started as a good-faith effort to work together on school reform became a tug-of-war over turf. We observed poor communication, widespread suspicion and outright anger among the factions. Parochialism prevailed.

Because this pattern of behavior was so consistent in all four of these diverse school districts, we can only conclude that it was not the individuals but something about the system itself that encouraged conflict, not cooperation.

The most harmful effect of these turf battles was that well-meaning professionals ended up being distracted from the primary challenge that brought them together in the first place: improving educational opportunities for the students.

Most attempts at reform focus on the particulars of education: teaching, curriculum, standards, assessment and so forth. Based on our research in these four communities, however, it is important not to lose sight of what might be an equally significant overarching challenge: overcoming the "politics as usual" behavior that seemed to inevitably emerge.

Reforms often begin with an optimistic, cooperative spirit. All parties — superintendents, school board members, principals, teachers, parents and outside advocates for reform — are united by the shared challenge of improving their school systems. They agree up front that change will take a long time to achieve and will require continued dialogue, discussion, compromise and explanation.

But somewhere during the process, reforms often bog down and lose their luster as traditional, narrowly partisan modes of interaction within districts assert themselves. Positions harden and distrust sets in.
The Four Communities

In order to protect the confidentiality of individuals who shared their views with us, Public Agenda will not identify the four school districts examined in this study. They are geographically diverse. One is in the New York City suburbs. The others are in the Midwest, the South and the West.

Among educators, the four school districts would most likely be judged as average to good. One district is in a state highly regarded among education reformers for its innovation and experimentation. Another is in a state where education reform has been a priority for a decade. A top official from another district was recently tapped by the Clinton administration to join the U.S. Department of Education. The fourth district, while not recognized as an educational innovator, has been praised for its efforts to integrate its schools.

The four communities studied here are not “communities in trouble.” Nor are they communities without resources or strong middle-class participation in the schools. Yet, in each of the communities studied, education reform has fallen victim to division, factionalism and political gridlock.

Implications

The scope of this study is limited, but its focus and detail provide an especially revealing portrait of school reform as it is happening “on the ground.” This kind of case-study examination offers a depth of understanding that is not communicated through surveys or other quantitative studies. By capturing detailed, first-hand accounts, by recounting anecdotes and war stories, and by documenting the human emotions involved, we believe our research in these four communities sheds an important new light on what is happening in the nation’s schools — and why school reform is so difficult to achieve.

We are not sure whether every American school system is affected in the same way or to the same degree as these four communities are. But other studies we have done indicate that this might be so.

For instance, in Crosstalk: The Public, The Experts and Competitiveness, a report we published in 1991 in cooperation with the Business-Higher Education Forum, we described the serious gaps between the public and American leaders — both in how they understand the problems in the schools and what they propose as solutions.

In Educational Reform: The Players and the Politics, a 1992 survey conducted for the Kettering Foundation, we found notable differences in opinion between outsiders (business executives) and insiders (superintendents, school board, principals). Teachers tend to fall somewhere in the middle, sometimes siding with executives, sometimes with fellow educators.

In those two reports, we concluded that these gaps — both between insiders and outsiders and among insiders go a long way toward explaining why so few schools have fully responded to the alarm first sounded over a decade ago, with the publication of A Nation at Risk.

For the most part, we have let the participants in our study speak for themselves in these pages. Their voices speak all too eloquently about how far from consensus these four communities are — and about how much work remains before they can re-create the cooperative climate that will allow the best of the reform proposals to take root and flourish.

With this report and our ongoing research, Public Agenda hopes to do its part: both by bringing some much-needed national and local attention to this significant barrier to school reform and by offering a few suggestions for advancing the discussion.

Deborah Wadsworth
The highly political nature of education debate and reform was the most conspicuous characteristic observed in each of the districts examined for this study. In each, the various factions — school boards, parent groups, teachers unions, principals and administrators — were organized around narrow interests, competing to influence policy and trying to deflect initiatives adverse to their own special interests. The widespread fragmentation meant, in many cases, that the groups were in a perpetual tug-of-war over the issues.

Although most individuals within the groups seemed genuinely concerned with the well-being of students, the primary goal of the schools — quality education for students — had become peripheral to their day-to-day activity.

"A Giant Dysfunctional Family"

One Southern superintendent compared his school district to "a giant dysfunctional family." An official from a public interest group in the Midwest was equally critical. "When I go into meetings with teachers, I seldom hear teachers talking about what's good for the kids. I hear teachers talking about what is good for teachers. I think we have far too many people involved in the education system who are concerned about what's good for adults, as opposed to what's good for kids. And I'm even including parent groups who come in and talk about what's convenient for parents."

One former superintendent complained that school board members "adopted" one or two schools as their own, then pushed to make sure these institutions received services. "They said, 'I represent my community, somebody else represents (another) community. Let those folks take care of their folks, and I'll take care of mine.'"

In some cases, individuals who tried to promote the common good over constituents' wishes paid a heavy toll. One school board member, for example, voted to close a superfluous school located in her ward. She thought her vote to reapporition resources was in the best interest of the district; the school-age population in her ward had shrunk considerably while enrollment in other areas of the district had grown. But the school's active parents, teachers and community members attached to their alma mater rallied against the school closing. They let the board member know what they thought of her "common-interest" approach to representing their community:
She lost in the next election, and the school remained open.

The tone of divisiveness reached an extreme pitch in one of the districts. With a derisive tone, teachers reported that the superintendent wanted his school board to vote on a resolution mandating friendliness and civil relations among school board members who were hardly on speaking terms. The board unanimously approved the resolution.

**Encouraging Conflict**

In each of the communities Public Agenda examined, many of the participants acknowledged that no one seemed to be looking out for the common good. Some expressed a desire for political action driven by general interests rather than parochialism. But the logic of the system seemed to compel each group to act on partisan interest for fear they would end up shouldering disproportionate burdens and sacrifices if they did not.

In all four communities, the great majority of stakeholders seemed to conclude that the best way to achieve their goals was to band together with like-minded individuals and press their special issue of concern. In each district, Public Agenda heard stories of organized groups intervening on behalf of their own interests, and succeeding. A school would have a teaching position restored because of parental outcry; a suspended student would be reinstated because an interest group threatened suit; a proposed cut in teacher pay would be deferred because of the union’s power. All the players seemed to draw the same conclusion — that organization and activism on behalf of their own specific interests works and that it is a necessary reaction to the partisanship of the other players.

“We’ve got so much power in special interests that it’s very difficult for anyone to be responsible for the big picture,” said a Western superintendent. “Each special interest is more concerned about the outcome for its particular group than the common good.”

A business executive from the South said, “There is so little trust between the teachers’ union and the administration — and there are faults in both courts — and there’s such uncertainty... that these people become almost reactionary. It’s not in the interest of either power group to merge.”

**Parents Play, Too**

One might expect parental involvement in the schools to contribute to the protection of students’ interests and advance the quality of education overall. To explore this point, Public Agenda talked to parents active in parent-teacher groups in each community about their perspectives and experiences. These “active parents” knew when, how and with whom to intervene to solve a specific problem. Yet in each case, their primary focus and accomplishment was to navigate their own children through the system, agitating and pressuring until a specific problem affecting their kids was resolved.

“Administrators are not sure they’re going to have jobs next year and they’re saying, ‘Please, I’ll take care of it. Let’s just not have any more problems right now. I can’t deal with any more problems like that,’” one Southern parent explained. “So the children are suffering. And if you come in and throw a tantrum and yell and scream, they’re going to put that brushfire out.”

One Northeastern parent recalled that 25 parents had gone to the principal and said, “We are going to harass that teacher unless you get rid of him.” “Nothing would have changed, he said, “unless the parents had come in raging.” Several parents in other communities told similar stories. “The people who go in and keep at it, and [keep] at it, will get what they want. And it’s
the only way you get anything,” said one Southern parent.

In all four communities, the system responded to the most persistent parents — the squeaky wheels that made the most noise. They had learned how to get results.

**Interests of Some Children Ignored**

The active parents acknowledged, however, that the fundamental problem remained after their intervention. One active parent may succeed in removing her child from the class of an ineffective teacher, but the rest of the class is stuck. “What makes me so sad is the children who don’t have any advocates, who don’t have a parent or guardian or someone who can go in and help them with their problems. They are just left flat,” said one Southern parent.

Ironically, the school systems’ responsiveness to active parents in all four communities served to maintain the status quo. When parents’ immediate concerns for their own children were placated, these potential agents of change were pacified. Their anger and dissatisfaction dissipated; their motivation waned. The system allowed individual-level efficacy, but prevented system-wide impact. Consequently, the system endures; the problems remain.

**Assumed Motives, Overriding Fears**

Stakeholders in every group — teachers, principals, administrators, board members, active parents and citizens — frequently interpreted and described events in their district in Machiavellian terms. In every community, respondents used the vocabulary and imagery of “hard ball” politics to describe the recent history of the district, suspecting that “hidden hands” were setting forces in motion, that actions were “power plays,” that motives were “camouflaged,” and that decisions were made in “back rooms.”

One superintendent said teachers were behind parental pressure on the administration.

He spoke of “heavy resistance” to budget cuts, and said, “Of course, with budget cuts, parents are driven by teachers. Budget cuts always affect teachers’ assignments, and to protect themselves from having to argue their own case, they get parents riled up about how this will hurt the children and let them argue their case.”

Some teachers complained that administrators often tried to make decisions by fiat to head off predictable resistance from teachers. Asked to explain why administrators pursued this track, one teacher responded: “Why? To see how much they can get away with, how much they can force upon the teacher before backing up and saying, ‘I wanted to see how far I could push you, so I could back up a few steps and make you think you gained something when, after all, I’ve still won.’” Two colleagues simultaneously voiced agreement: “Yeah, it’s a power game.”

**Operating Under a Veil of Politics**

The veil of politics overshadowing relationships within the school districts left some respondents feeling afraid and intimidated. Public Agenda researchers, who have conducted countless interviews and successfully established rapport with respondents in business, politics, the criminal justice system and many other arenas, were surprised by the caution and fearfulness exhibited by many respondents in this study. Teachers in particular seemed fearful that any criticism of the school system might leak out and affect them adversely. In one instance, teachers were so concerned about confidentiality that they insisted that the interviewer turn off the tape recorder to insure that they would have deniability.

The political overlay on some occasions produced surprisingly strong reactions to events that might seem relatively benign to outsiders. At the end of an interview, the superintendent of one district was concerned that the release of this report would have an adverse impact on his relations with the school
Reform efforts must also deal with the legacy of previous attempts to change the schools. Each time a reform effort is launched and abandoned, each time change-oriented personnel are fired or move on, the reservoir of support for change is diminished.

They asked to meet with the unidentified individuals. Negotiations over the agenda of the meeting and who would participate ensued, and the unidentified individuals were able to exact concessions even though their affiliation and importance were not known.

**Peace Talks and the Politics of Manipulation**

To survive in the politics of hyperpluralism, some superintendents tried to stitch together patchwork alliances of partisan groups and reach compromises over management and policy issues. Others resorted to the politics of manipulation, trying to co-opt, neutralize and deflect the power and energy of competing groups.

One Southern business executive compared a superintendent’s task of reconciling competing interests to convening peace talks. “It’s almost like someone standing up and saying, ‘Look, let’s bring all the parties of the Middle East together and I can be the peacemaker.’ The situation is of that magnitude.”

One superintendent reflected on the political nature of his job this way: “Everybody will agree that they want the schools to improve, but when you talk about how, you’re in a terrible argument. I’m like a shuttle diplomat. I go back and forth until we can put something together that everyone will pretty much accept, and then we go public with it.” It is interesting to note that in this description of the politics of compromise, the general public is brought in only at the end of the process.

In some cases, the politics of manipulation seemed to drive the activity within the district. A superintendent in one of the districts confidently mapped out his strategy for winning work-rule concessions from the teachers union. To strengthen his bargaining power, his battle plan included branding the school board’s support of his policies and focusing media attention on teachers’ productivity. When we asked him if he had any doubts about his strategy, he said, “If you get into trouble, you change your tactics.”

A superintendent in another district managed to limit dissension for more than a decade by isolating and co-opting competing centers of power. Frontline teachers were unhappy with the superintendent, but their union leadership had nominated him for an award. When his contract was expiring, his principals began to meet for the first time — in secret — to discuss issues that concerned them. Much of this superintendent’s approach seemed manipulative: he co-opted potential critics, and divided and isolated personnel. But he had experienced a long and fractious teachers’ strike in a previous district, and he had learned his lesson: A calm district that was easy to control was his first priority.

**Reform du Jour: The Legacy of Past Reforms**

The lack of communication and the mutual suspicion, isolation and intense partisanship among the stakeholders were not the only obstacles to reform. The impact of past reform efforts has become an issue in and of itself, leaving a legacy of skepticism in its trail and strengthening the system’s propensity for inertia. As past reform efforts are abandoned in favor of still newer reforms, as key personnel leave and are replaced with new players unwedded to the previous reform agenda, teachers and active parents often adopt a
"wait-and-see" attitude at best, a cynical "this too shall pass" stance at worse.

A teacher from our Northeastern district reflected on the burden that change had come to mean: "One problem is the continually changing concepts in education. Every three to five years the think tanks are trying to change the traditional concepts of education. It requires a lot more work on the part of teachers, and some of them are scared." One Southern teacher described her strategy for surviving the cycle of reforms by saying, "When you've been in the district 20 years or so, you just learn to go with the flow. It doesn't really matter who's doing what down there. You just kind of go on with it."

Active parents were also upset with the constant turnover in personnel and policies. One Southern parent said, "If we're ever gonna move forward, we have to stop wasting money implementing programs and within two to three years yanking the programs out, starting all over again. You know, we're talking about $5 million to $15 million programs over a five-year period that never get fully implemented."

One superintendent acknowledged that his district had been caught up in a reform overload and then had to deal with the skepticism that greeted newer initiatives. "In the mid-to-late 1980s, we were trying to do the latest, newest, most innovative thing that came along. Now, with the restructuring effort, we're really trying to talk about the long-term, not constantly shifting gears... Some schools are caught up in it, some are still in the process stages or feel like they're fighting a rearguard action and saying 'This too shall pass,'" he said.

While frontline teachers may hunker down and try to wait out reforms, administrators trying to move up the educational hierarchy respond quickly to a new superintendent's reform agenda.

But one principal saw problems with this as well, saying, "We're promoting people who are so 'with the program' that the program isn't the answer. Restructuring is going to fail because it has become, at least in this school district, bureaucratized."

**IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM**

Advocates of reform have focused much of their efforts on recommending changes in curriculum, setting higher standards, strengthening professional training, enriching early childhood education, promoting parental involvement and so on. Their recommendations are often the result of years of research and meticulous planning for "how things should be."

Yet education reformers often assume that stakeholders in communities across the country will cooperate among themselves to implement worthwhile suggestions. They often assume that their "good idea" will overcome years of political wrangling and gridlock; that habits of thinking based on suspicion and fear, and keenly looking out for narrow interest; will automatically be replaced with enthusiasm for reform.

But education reform efforts that bank on the spontaneous goodwill and easy acceptance of stakeholders may face a less-than-promising future. Internal divisions within the district, the dominance of narrow interests, the tradition of conflict and competition for power — all of these are powerful patterns of behavior which, goodwill or no, can be expected to reassert themselves unless their existence is acknowledged and direct measures to address them are put into place. Reform efforts must also deal with the legacy of previous attempts to change the schools. Each time a reform effort is launched and abandoned, each time change-oriented personnel are fired or move on, the reservoir of support for change is diminished and a tendency toward inertia strengthened.

"When you've been in the district 20 years or so, you just learn to go with the flow. It doesn't really matter who's doing what down there. You just kind of go on with it." — Southern Teacher
Anyone who has spent time in any school district in any part of the country is well aware of tensions between “central administration” and school personnel, between teachers and the principal, between teachers and department heads, between grammar school teachers and teachers at the secondary level, and so on. Interpreting complex relationships as “us” vs. “them” is probably part of the human condition, and certainly not restricted to education.

That educators disagree among themselves is not news. Public Agenda’s 1992 national survey of educators revealed important and potentially troublesome differences between various groups of educators on what should be done to improve the schools. For example, 64 percent of teachers supported common national standards. In contrast, superintendents and principals were divided about this approach, with slight majorities opposed to national standards. Sixty percent of teachers said needless waste in administration and bureaucracy was a very serious problem, compared to only 28 percent or less of administrators. And while majorities of teachers said classes were overcrowded and teachers’ salaries were too low, only small proportions of principals and superintendents agreed.

What is striking from these four case studies is not that differences of opinion and perspective exist. What is striking is the depth of division and frustration, and the stunning lack of communication among the various school “insiders.” In all four school districts, teachers virtually unanimously said that they felt isolated from central administration and from each other.

The Mystery Administrators

Teachers had little contact with central administration. Many didn’t know who the key administrators were or what their functions were. They knew administrators got higher salaries than teachers, but they knew little about what administrators do to earn that money. The anonymity of administrators and the pervasive skepticism over the value of their roles led teachers to speak about them in a disdainful and contemptuous tone. Teachers saw themselves as fighting in the trenches while their commanders were far away from the battle, collecting fat salaries and doing little that was productive to help.

“I don’t have a lot of contact with all these mystery administrators with strange titles
who make $90,000 a year. They don’t come to our building,” said a Northeastern teacher. A Southern teacher echoed those sentiments: “I don’t even know who they are, what they do, or where they’re stationed. I know they make more money than I do.”

A Midwestern teacher thought administrators tried hard, but added, “I wish I got more of a feeling that we were on the same team. I often feel like we are at cross-purposes.”

“I know the superintendent’s name and that’s about it,” said a Southern teacher. “I don’t think [administrators] listen to what teachers have to say. As far as knowing what they do, I really don’t know.”

Out of the Loop

The coldness and lack of trust between administrators and teachers, and even the lack of contact between the two groups, was a recurring theme. A teacher in our Southern district said: “I’ve been here 17 years and I’ve often thought that it would just be wonderful if our board members or our supervisors would come sometime in a friendly way to see what we are doing. I would love it.”

Teachers felt they were not part of the decision-making process, and that their needs were not considered when decisions were made. Teachers often felt that central administration worked in a vacuum and made uninformed decisions on whim.

A teacher in the Southern group said, “I can’t imagine that [central office administrators] make any decision whatsoever with teachers in mind. They are so isolated, it’s such a satellite down there, that when they make decisions they probably sit around tables and say: ‘Hey, that’s a great idea. We’ll do that.’ And somebody says, ‘Wait a minute. Did you think about so and so?’ and they say, ‘Oh, all right, maybe not.’ I just can’t imagine that they ever make decisions with the students’ ability to learn in mind.”

 Administrators Respond

Some superintendents were aware of the skepticism with which “downtown” administrators were regarded and tried to address such attitudes. A Western superintendent said, “Even though we’ve downsized the central office by 31 percent, a lot of people ask, ‘Well, what do those folks do?’ I try to point out that this isn’t just a fun-and-games operation. It’s a $600 million a year business with 12,000 employees, with lots of federal and state mandates to meet.”

But suspicion and distrust ran deep and were difficult to counter. Attempting to lead by example, this same superintendent sacrificed due compensation, but this gesture was greeted with skepticism. “I was giving back money that was guaranteed to me in my contract because I would have been the only one to get a raise last year, and it was well publicized, but people still don’t believe it. They say, I’ve got a separate deal and I’m getting bonuses and the whole bit.”

Lack of Communication

In all four districts, communication across the educational hierarchy was judged to be so bad that teachers said they learned more from the press and each other about policy changes than from the administrative leadership. As a result, teachers’ conversations about personnel and policy issues were often dominated by rumor and speculation rather than real information.

For example, one Southern teacher said, “When something is going on, I generally read about it in the newspaper that morning. Then I come to school and ask other teachers what they know about it. [Our district] was going to cut some teachers and counselors. I didn’t know anything until I read about it in the paper.”
A teacher from the Northeastern district, while acknowledging the “distance between central administration and teachers,” seemed resigned to it. “They should make sure there is toilet paper and crayons and just leave me alone.”

The Silent Treatment

“When we have lunch together, we’re just sort of stress-stunned and suctioning food for 25 minutes and then back to the front line.”

Southern Teacher

Even when given opportunities for dialogue, individual teachers admitted they (but not their union leadership) often lapse into silence and abstain from discussion. Some feared that open criticism of administration would lead to reprisals; others didn’t seem to have the confidence to speak publicly; still others were simply tired of fighting old battles that are seldom resolved.

“Sometimes I sit in the back of the room and think ‘I don’t agree with that,’ but I don’t say anything. Some people do, and sometimes I do, but you have to be careful. They can send you to Timbuktu,” said one Northeastern teacher.

A teacher from the Southern group admitted to calling the central office anonymously to disagree with policy. “Often, if I don’t agree with a policy, I feel that I’m running a risk to come out against it too strongly.” A Northeastern teacher agreed. “Even though we have tenure and all, if you say something, you could be teaching in the basement. It’s like anywhere, you have to be careful of what you say and who you say it to.”

Some superintendents were not aware of a communication problem at all. Said one, “I don’t do anything in a vacuum. Everything is done with the whole administrative staff, then it goes beyond to teachers. I meet with teachers every month to talk about ideas.” Most teachers we had spoken with in his district had hardly seen this superintendent, much less heard his ideas.

Just a Charade

Teachers quite consciously distrusted what they perceive as administrators’ public relations maneuvers. When administrators do try to communicate, their efforts may be greeted with skepticism. Dialogue initiated by administration was seen as politically inspired—a public relations stunt rather than a sincere attempt to engage in real dialogue.

One teacher from the Southern site said administrators engage in a charade of seeking teachers’ opinions. “But that’s all it is. It’s just show, and most decisions are made without even that charade.” Another teacher from the same site was more bitter. “I think somebody took a course on how to deal with people and learned that you’re supposed to give people a chance to express their opinions. So they listen, but they don’t do anything about it.”

Still another Southern teacher said, “I think what happens is they make cynics out of teachers and we become so cynical and so critical. I’m sure administration hates for us to be critical, but we’re not treated professionally. We’re not listened to. I’m convinced of that now.”

Isolated from Each Other

Teachers feel isolated not only from the central administration, but from each other. They are isolated from colleagues at other schools, and even from colleagues in their own schools. Consequently, isolation and the lack of communication in these four districts was more than the result of the normal distance one finds between managers and front-line workers.

In all four districts, teachers seemed to work in a pressure-cooker environment with little time to share resources, information and experience among themselves. Teachers, as they described it, were locked into a stressful situation for many hours and then released to go home. There was little opportunity to reflect on the day and to draw on the experiences of colleagues. It was, therefore, difficult for them
to develop a sense of context about their activity. One sensed they were simply trying to survive the day.

A Southern teacher-counselor said, “We are so agenda-packed…. We really don’t get any chance to visit. We’re so busy, and we’re all just trying to react to situations.” A Western teacher summed up his stress this way: “There is no career as isolated as mine. I can go all day without talking to anyone over 21 years old. We don’t see other teachers at work.”

Not unexpectedly, teachers from different schools had even less contact than those at the same school. And the few events that allow for such contact seem to have strict (administrator-defined) agendas. A Southern teacher said, “About four times a year we meet, but it’s not a time for socializing. It’s strictly dissemination of information.” His colleague agreed, and said she knew of no opportunity for contact other than meetings with “highly organized” agendas. “That doesn’t leave time for any other thing.”

Even teachers from the same buildings and from the same departments seemed to have little time to talk among themselves to compare notes and to learn from each other. A teacher at the Southern site said his day was “agenda heavy” and that he and his colleagues “rarely have the time or the atmosphere for exchanging any sort of creative ideas or even having creative ideas. And when we have lunch together, we’re just sort of stress-stunned and suctioning food for 25 minutes and then back to the front line.”

**IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM**

For a reform effort to succeed, it is essential that those who must make the change — at the district, in the school, in the classroom — be convinced of the plan’s merit. Reform, therefore, depends on good communication.

Stakeholders thus need to understand the rationale for change as well as the specifics of how it is to be accomplished. But the quality of ordinary communication in public education seems so limited and so constrained that it raises serious doubts about whether it is possible to build consensus for reform.

Since major stakeholders — teachers, active parents and administrators — in school districts rarely speak with each other, they can also be suspicious of honest dialogue when it does take place. In carefully planned, well-thought-out reform initiatives, communication problems may not emerge immediately because those who initiate change make extraordinary efforts to explain their ideas and address concerns. But communication problems almost inevitably resurface as the reforms become real and their implications and demands become more apparent. Reformers relax their initial efforts, and old patterns of not talking — or not talking frankly — reassert themselves.

But the quality of ordinary communication seems so limited and so constrained, that it raises serious doubts about whether it is possible to build consensus for reform.
A Closer Look:
The Gap Between
Parents and Educators

Many of those concerned about the state of education in the United States today have placed enormous hope in increasing parental involvement in the schools. Parents naturally want the best for their children, and many observers believe that parents, acting as informed and more demanding consumers, can be an important force for change in education. But the evidence from these four case studies suggest that active parents face an uphill battle in stimulating change and that their impact may be limited in an environment that is fiercely guarded.

What’s more, the evidence from these four communities suggests that while active parents may be effective in improving the education their own children receive — lobbying to get their children into better classes with better teachers, for example — their impact on the overall quality of education offered in the school district has been minimal.

Parents sensed an air of mystery about how and why decisions were made, and many suspected the dearth of information was not accidental — that educators preferred to keep them in the dark.

Struggling to Be Heard

In all four communities, active parents who made a special effort to inform themselves and participate in school decisions felt they had to struggle to be heard. They said the potential for communication with the schools was limited, and they often said they did not even know who was accountable for policy decisions in their districts. “I think parents aren’t exactly sure who makes the decisions. You are never quite sure where to direct your suggestions,” said one Northeastern parent. They sensed an air of mystery about how and why decisions were made, and many suspected the dearth of information was not accidental — that educators preferred to keep them in the dark.

Schools, they said, were merely paying lip service to parental involvement in education. Active parents felt that to be heard, drastic tactics were in order. Trying to get information over the telephone, for example, was just not good enough. Said one Midwestern parent, “I think most parents don’t have the foggiest idea of what’s going on in the schools.” A Southern parent waved a piece of paper and said, “Here’s our level of communi-
cation right here. This is all you get.” Another Southern parent agreed. “I think as working parents we ought to be able to pick up the phone and get information that we need. But we can’t.”

Taking It into Their Own Hands

Active parents learned that if they wanted a tangible response to their concerns, they needed to take matters into their own hands. They believed that layers of bureaucracy insulated the top policymakers from hearing about problems. One Southern parent suggested skipping phone calls in favor of meeting with school officials in person. “I have sat in that administrator’s office for many, many hours and I’ve found them very interested in hearing about the problems. But I’m not sure how much one gets from a phone call to the big chief.”

Some parents suspected that educators were less than honest with them, perhaps intentionally withholding information about how decisions were made. “The teacher might say one thing to your face and write something entirely different in the records,” said one Northeastern parent.

A teacher at a Southern magnet school acknowledged that some parents became very frustrated in dealing with administrators, particularly because of the school’s “mysterious selection process” by which students are accepted into particular programs. “I’ve heard parents practically tearing their hair out trying to break through the bureaucratic system downtown,” he said.

Educators: Parents Not Motivated Enough

For their part, some educators felt that some parents were not motivated enough to find effective communication channels. Instead, teachers said that parents expected teachers to do all the work. One teacher from the Midwest related a complaint she had just heard from a parent. “The parent said, ‘Well, last year no teachers contacted me.’ We sent home progress reports, we sent home year-end grades, we had an open house, we had conferences. I never saw this woman. So I’m supposed to go to her? What about her coming to me?’”

There was also a perception that high schoolers were least interested in parental involvement in their education, and sometimes were embarrassed by it, and that this explained parents’ lack of involvement at that level. A Southern teacher observed, “By the time they get to the secondary level, I think quite often the students discourage communication.”

Many teachers had a specific, perhaps narrow definition of parental involvement. Often, when teachers talked about the lack of parental involvement in education, what they meant was that parents do not prepare their children for school or reinforce learning at home. For some, the problem was that some parents did not teach their children basic social skills or help them with homework.

“We don’t need the parents involved with the schools, we need them involved with their kids,” said one Western teacher. “We can do the job with the kids whose parents are parenting them. We don’t need the parents in school, we need the parents at home.”

A Southern teacher was more critical: “Everybody’s an expert on how children should be educated, except the people who are educating our children. And sometimes...the people who make decisions listen to [parents] as opposed to listening to the teacher.”

Message Received

A number of active parents interviewed for this study had concluded that their participation was unwelcome. “The majority of
educators are fearful of the parent who is actually involved,” said one Southern parent. A parent from the Northeast agreed: “The administration is looking to have less involvement by the parents, not more.” They say they want shared decision-making, “but the administration doesn’t want the parents to know everything.”

With real allies in this quarter, many teachers feel, half the battle would be won.

But others define “parental involvement” as a means to change the governance of the schools, a way to insure that the interests of students do not fall victim to a static educational bureaucracy, and to shake up the status quo. They see parents as active “consumers” who can and should demand a better product.

Both of these definitions are legitimate, and for many observers, both should be implemented as part of successful school reform. But for this to happen, communities will have to overcome the reluctance of educators to endorse parental involvement that reaches beyond the home or the bake sale.

Communities will also need active parents whose concerns extend beyond their own children and whose capacity to influence the school goes beyond having their own child’s problem solved. Yet another challenge is how to involve parents who are not currently active in the schools — parents who are intimidated, too pressured or disorganized in their own personal lives to take real responsibility for their children’s education.

Communities also need active parents whose concerns extend beyond their own children and whose capacity to influence the school goes beyond having their own child’s problem solved.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM

Most reform efforts reflexively call for increasing the scope of parental involvement in the schools. But this case study suggests that there are striking differences in how parental involvement is defined, and that this is not being frankly discussed. For some teachers in particular, “more parental involvement” means better parenting and more reinforcement of learning in the home. Teachers see parents as valuable potential allies in motivating students and in helping youngsters understand how important their education will be to them in the future.
The involvement of business and business leaders in the school system varied considerably in all four districts studied. At one end, there was informed, often critical, detachment: individuals and businesses who thought about education and were interested in the schools, but who rarely got involved.

At the mid-point of involvement, there were businesses that supported education at the building level through such programs as school partnerships and mentor programs.

At the activist level, there were businesses that focused on the macro and political level, working to influence the appointment of superintendents, the composition and support of school boards, and the wider political environment — state and local statutes and tax propositions involving the schools. At this level, efforts were not always coordinated with or approved by the educational community.

Public Agenda’s interviews with business leaders — and with educators about the role of business in education — suggested that there were important differences in perspective, even in cultural outlook, that affect all levels of business-education involvement. There were significant differences in perspective regarding the function of education in society, the most important problems facing the schools, and the role business should play in improving education. Ironically, each group charged the other with being “out of touch” with the “real world” in important and fundamental ways. And although contact and involvement increased business people’s sympathy for education personnel and the difficulties they face, it did little to allay their concerns about school performance.

Numerous studies, including Public Agenda’s national survey of educators and business leaders in 1992, have revealed widespread dissatisfaction among business people with the skills and education of recent high school graduates. For example, 66 percent of business executives said the nation’s public schools were doing a “poor job” of teaching students “a basic understanding of science and math” but only 15 percent or less of teachers, principals and superintendents agreed. While 56 percent of business executives said the schools were doing a “poor job” of teaching students “to write and speak grammatically...
correct English” only 14 percent or less of
teachers, principals and superintendents
agreed.

Indeed, there is a prevailing judgment
among business leaders that American schools
in general are not adequately performing one
of the most important tasks society assigns to
them — giving young people the skills and
knowledge that today’s economy requires. And
while opinion research routinely shows that
educators and citizens are more critical of
schools in general than they are of schools in
their own communities, business
leaders in Public Agenda’s 1992
survey expressed, perhaps
uniquely, strong dissatisfaction
with their own local schools.

The business leaders inter-
viewed for this study reflected
many of these prevailing
business attitudes. A Northeast-
ern businessman complained, “I
don’t think the schools are doing
as good a job as they did, say,
five years ago. When young
people come to me looking for
employment, they are not as
prepared to work as they were. Something is
missing.” A Midwestern business executive
pointed to the high costs of what she saw as the
schools’ failings: “I see too many people who
can’t cope when they graduate because they
don’t have salable skills, and must remedy at
the post secondary level. That adds almost a
year to the educational process and a lot of
money. The cost of remediation at the post
secondary level is absolutely enormous.”

But while most educators we spoke to
readily acknowledged the need to strengthen
the skills and knowledge of graduating stu-
dents, few characterized the issue — as many
business leaders do — as an urgent problem
that could severely damage the country’s
chances for economic growth and prosperity.

Some educators entirely rejected the idea
that a primary function of education is to prepare
youngsters for the work force. Some resented
what they saw as the business view that schools
exist only to provide employees. “I do not see
my job primarily as being there to provide jobs
or to provide kids for businesses. That is way
down on the list,” said one Midwestern teacher.
“I have a lot more important things to teach
kids than how to get a job?”

Another teacher suggested that, on the
contrary, it was the obligation of business to
provide jobs that match students’ education.
“Why is it our obligation to provide them with
employees, as opposed to their responsibility to
provide us with jobs for our students?”

These sharply contrasting views about the
purpose of education were the most jarring
indicators of what seem to be two separate and
largely segregated cultures. Each had different
priorities for education, different values,
different assessments of how the schools are
working, and different prescriptions for how
they should be changed.

In some instances, these different cultural
outlooks — and the resentments and mis-
understandings arising from them — have under-
dmined potential partnerships between business
and education. But in many other cases, the
cross-fertilization seemed to hold promise.

Business Executives on the
Schools: Isolated and Unwilling
to Be Held Accountable

Many of the business executives inter-
viewed for this study said educators were out
of touch with the economic realities of the
times and that schools were virtually untouched
by business demands such as high productivity,
top-notch quality, and a clear headed focus on
goals and performance. Business people fre-
quently said schools and teachers were isolated,
teachers did not work full time and schools were
run with bureaucratic inefficiency and bungling
that would not be tolerated in the business world.

A Western business executive said,
“Schools have basically isolated themselves.
Other than the PTA, they really don’t want you
on the school campus…. If you’re a grown
man and walk on a school campus, somebody’s going to check you out and see who you are. It’s not a place where you’re expected.”

Some superintendents agreed that teachers were isolated and that they lacked understanding of business and economic concerns. “They go into a room and they become kings of their territory, and it’s isolating. They have limited interaction with the outside world.”

The business community sometimes saw schools as being out of touch with the larger economic issues facing the community. A Northeastern executive criticized the leadership of his school district for not understanding important tax issues and how they affected the schools. “For example, there’s a state statute that allows condominiums to be assessed at roughly a third less than single-family houses. If schools could get involved at the state level to amend the statute, they wouldn’t be losing this money. Well, this came as a revelation to them,” he said.

Business leaders repeatedly mentioned educators’ calls for higher salaries and more money — at a time when all institutions are being forced to make do with less — as indicative of an “out-of-touch” approach and an unwillingness to be held accountable. For example, one Midwestern executive dismissed educators’ calls for higher salaries. “The educator’s job is a difficult, stressful job, but I think they’re a little off base in what they say about pay. They need to understand that the work world works 12 months a year, not 10 or 9.”

Another executive commented, “What we hear in the business world is [educators’] focus on pay. Business people would like to get off the dime and say: ‘We have to set goals. Can we look at goals with you people?’ But the educators keep coming back to pay. I think there’s some tension on that issue.”

The comments of business leaders in this study about what they saw as educators’ preoccupation with money reflected a widespread national business perspective. In the Public Agenda survey, for example, one of the most striking differences between business people and administrators was on whether schools need more money. A near-unanimous 95 percent of business executives thought that “unless our nation’s public schools are substantially reorganized, spending more money would be a waste of valuable resources.” Only 53 percent of superintendents agreed, while 47 percent said, “More money would solve most of the problems our nation’s public schools face.”

**Too Much Bureaucracy, Too Much Politics**

Many business leaders interviewed also expressed frustration with the bureaucracy of the public schools and the political mandates under which they operate. Business people often saw schools as top-heavy (a perception that has some resonance with teachers) and intensely bureaucratic.

One Western business executive, criticizing what he saw as top-heavy education administration, complained that local officials even tried to disguise the problem. “The layers upon layers of administration in the school district are exacerbated by the fact that many ‘administrators’ are not identified as administrators, but as ‘teachers.’”

Public Agenda researchers heard many stories — often from business people themselves — about executives who had entered the educational system with a “can-do” spirit only to end up retreating, chastened when they confronted intractable obstacles to change.

Many education decisions, for example, are “purely political and have nothing to do with efficiency,” explained one Western business executive. “That’s very hard for
business people who have authority and control to work in a democratic setup; they’re not used to that.”

Another Midwestern business executive put it this way: “One thing that frustrates business people once they get involved is something that’s not at all in the hands of educators and administrators. They find out about the parameters, rules and regulations placed on the schools to provide certain things. When business people see that, they just throw up their hands.”

Often the problem went beyond differing perspectives and expectations to a severe lack of candor and communication. In at least one case, business and educator judgments about school performance were diametrically opposed. In a series of interviews in one community, Public Agenda researchers began their day talking with a local business leader, a senior executive from one of the community’s largest employers. He was concerned, he said, about the lack of skills among graduates and quickly moved on to indicting the schools for not focusing on critical academic subjects. A particular sore point was a radio station operated from one of the local high schools. “I’ve always been opposed to the radio station because very few people listen to it and I think it costs $50,000 a year and benefits only 10 students. I wonder if this $50,000 couldn’t be better spent somewhere else, or not at all.”

But just hours later, interviewers spoke with the local superintendent of schools asking him, among other questions, how his local schools were regarded by area businesses. The superintendent had built a long-standing relationship with the same executive and referred to him as someone impressed with the performance of the schools. He went on to use that same radio station as an example of the good things the schools were doing. “We have an FM radio station at the high school that’s FCC licensed. Communication opens the world,” he said.

**Who’s Out of Touch?**

Some of the educators interviewed for this study understood and sympathized with the business point of view, even though they did not agree with every aspect of it. As one Midwestern teachers union official explained, the business community is at times “incredibly frustrated with the archaic nature of school accounting and financial accountability. And, on occasion, they lobby against the large chunk of money going to teachers salaries.”

But others resented what they saw as business people’s uninformed judgments and air of superiority. A teacher from the Northeast, for example, strongly disagreed with the sentiment that educators have it “soft.” “They think we have it easy because we get the summers off. They think we get paid too much. They have no idea of what we’re going through. We make thousands of decisions every day. It’s incredibly stressful, and business people just take potshots. I don’t think they value us, and I resent that.”

Many educators seemed to feel that it was business — not education — that was out of touch. Too many business people, educators said, are just not aware of the social changes and pressures the schools must live with in the 1990s. Many felt that business people did not understand the complexities and difficulties facing the public schools. One Midwestern teacher criticized CEOs and media alike as “educated in suburban schools, highly motivated and qualified,” and having “no idea of what we, a city school, are like.”

Educators often criticized businesses for assuming that problems in the schools and in business called for the same solutions. A Midwestern principal, for example, criticized
business for thinking of students as products. “You can throw away a bad product, you can’t throw away a bad kid,” she said.

“They’re going to try to use more business techniques rather than trying to be humane — a kind of ‘teach those who want to learn, get rid of the others.’”

Another educator resented business admonitions that schools should make better use of tax dollars. “There are pressures, financial and political, on the budget that [businesses] don’t understand. There is a lot they could clean up if they ever had the patience to just send in some financial CEO and fix it. But I’m not sure they’d be able to fix it with the budget limitations either.”

**Hands Off?**

Most of the educators we spoke with had some experience with business efforts — school partnerships or mentor programs — to improve and/or assist the schools. Many teachers were relieved that someone else in the community was taking an interest in the schools but many were also skeptical about just how much help was needed or welcome.

Some educators seemed worried about relinquishing power and responsibility. Said one Western teacher, “I wonder how much involvement we want from businesses, just how far we want them to step in. We’re very hesitant to accept what [our business partner] says because we’re the professionals, we’re the experts.”

According to a Midwestern teachers union official, “There are some teachers who are highly suspicious of having anybody in the school. There are those who don’t want anybody involved in schools, which is an old paradigm that we are working very hard to get over. And it’s a kind of funny professional paranoia, but they don’t trust anybody else and don’t really want to be open to that kind of scrutiny.”

Others expressed uncertainty about the motives of business and the depth of their commitment. Many teachers saw business involvement as being mostly public relations.

“I think the partnership program is very superficial,” said one Western teacher. Her school’s business partner “wants the high visibility and the PR exposure,” she said. She criticized the company for spending money on “nonacademic efforts, high-visibility things that don’t have a whole lot to do with what our mission is at the school.”

An education reporter interviewed in one community had this to say about business involvement in schools: “It’s all PR. I’m amazed at the number of press releases that come across my desk. We just throw it all out. Let me say this: If businesses took all the money that they spend trying to promote how they’re promoting education and spent it to promote education, I think the schools would be in much better shape.”

Some educators and parents even had moral reservations about school partnerships with certain companies. “One group has what I call a latent sixties, hippie attitude that businesses are going to corrupt us all and [kids will be damaged] if they happen to see a little advertising on the school wall,” said one Midwestern teachers union official.

**Cultural Exchanges**

Significant numbers of business people and educators interviewed for this study expressed grave doubts about expanded business involvement in education. Business people expressed frustration at their inability to “get things moving” and resentment that so many educators seemed to want their money, but not their ideas. Educators worried that business people did not understand, and perhaps did not really care about, the challenges they faced. They expressed their own resentments that business people did not respect them as professionals.

Despite these significant “cultural” gaps between business people and educators, and
some fair degree of skepticism about the role business should play, many of those interviewed — both in business and education — reported a growing sense of understanding and improved communication coming from increased business-education exchanges.

Educators tended to think that when business people got involved with the schools they began to appreciate the school’s work. To a large extent, this perception is correct — business executives interviewed here who had regular contact with the schools generally voiced more appreciation of educators and were more sympathetic to the complexity of public education today.

For example, one Midwestern administrator made this point: “It is definitely the case that as businesses get closer to schools, as they get inside schools, they better understand the problems that schools face, and are more positive about the job we are doing.”

The nature of business involvement also has an important effect, one superintendent said. When they are “rolling up their sleeves — not just giving money — they see that learning is going on despite the problems that schools face.”

**Familiarity Breeds . . .**

Business executives with significant experience in the schools also reported the effects of their “learning curve.” Their views evolved, and they consequently become more critical of the attitudes of some of their business colleagues. One Western business executive, for example, called for business to be more subtle in applying business thinking to education. “Education is not business; business is not education . . . . One of the problems I’ve seen when businesses get involved is that they feel that you can apply everything they’ve learned in business to education.”

Another business executive said, “[Business] needs to understand how many agencies are placing expectations on the schools. [Business is] looking at the academic level only.”

Still another agreed that the business community “really doesn’t know very much about the educational process. Many of us are the products of educations that were private and a long way from where the public schools are today.”

When business executives got more involved in the schools, they recognized the many obstacles the schools face, including entrenched bureaucracy and politics. For some, recognizing the obstacles resulted in a more realistic partnership and a commitment to stay involved.

In the past, according to one Western business executive, the business community leaned toward small, “feel good” partnerships with schools, which may or may not have helped improve the educational process. Now “there is an acceptance of the fact that the process is a very lengthy one, requiring a certain level of patience, with an organizational structure that allows it to perform and follow through. It takes more than just the passion of the moment. It takes a process that has to be organized. And like any process, it takes a long time and a lot of people.”

And some interviews with educators also seemed to suggest that real understanding might be possible. Recalling the early stages of a business partnership, one Midwestern teacher said, “I would have to say, people were fairly cynical. They were worried that somebody was going to come in and tell us, ‘You guys are doing it all wrong, we’ve got the answers and here we are.’ But it has turned out to be a real good thing on both sides.”

**IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM**

Many education reformers — and many executives and on-the-job educators — have expressed enormous optimism about the role business might play in improving education,
both in an overall sense and through specific programs to help individual schools.

But interviews conducted in these four communities suggested that in practice this strategy is getting mixed reviews. In many cases, unspoken tensions, misunderstandings and resentments were kept politely beneath the surface. The differences in educators’ and business executives’ professional cultures underlay much of the conflict.

The business culture prizes productivity and accountability, and they need kids who can do today’s jobs. To them, the main “product” the schools produce now is not what they, the “consumers,” need and want. Therefore, a shake-up is in order. The education culture, on the other hand, places a high value on giving individuals second and third chances, and it prizes constancy, patience, self-esteem, and security for students and personnel. Education, much more than business, sees a rationale and benefit to current programs and modes of organization, and a potential danger in applying too much “business thinking” to the schools. Interestingly, central office administrators we interviewed often made use of business jargon and referenced business management techniques. Administrators seemed to keep abreast of the latest business thinking, but the extent to which their school districts could be subject to business-management strategies was unclear. Principals and teachers, on the other hand, had little sympathy for applying business techniques in the schools.

If it were just a question of two different cultures learning to interact with each other, that would be one problem. But what was especially disturbing about some of these conversations was that even after business executives learned how to speak with educators and began to appreciate the difficulties schools face, their concerns were hardly alleviated. Cooperation and empathy might be there, but business people were still concerned that the bottom line was not improving. Some would keep at it, some would end the relationship in frustration, others would settle for the public relations benefit of school involvement. But some others are driven to take a more partisan approach to school reform. Said one Western business executive, “Everything used to be partnerships and ‘do good’ stuff and it didn’t make any difference. It wasn’t helping. So we’re getting into the advocacy business. We’re going to look at the major educational issues and figure out what we think is the best thing to do from our point of view, not from the educator’s point of view.”

In other cases, the cultural exchange between business and education seemed to be bearing fruit. These interviews found two important implications for business leaders interested in making a positive impact on education, neither entirely new. First, there is a long learning curve, and second, true cooperation takes time and persistence. The most effective local executives interviewed in this study took their education ventures very seriously, and they exhibited both a capacity for self-scrutiny and a surprising willingness to change their initial views.

But from our observations, there is an interesting piece missing from this picture: in all four communities studied, the cultural exchange seemed to be going in one direction only. That is, many business people talked about how they had learned more about the schools and become more subtle and open-minded in their thinking, but almost none of the educators — with the notable exception of superintendents — mentioned becoming more alert to business concerns, or thinking that some elements of business thinking might profitably be adopted in education.

Educators of course appreciated the increased sympathy and understanding they felt from business. They were grateful for help they received and appreciative of particular areas of
expertise — computer or accounting know-how, for example. They seemed to “like” business better, but we got no sense that they “understood” business better. Consequently, one strategy to which reformers might pay more attention is helping educators understand what is happening in business and why, and helping them consider whether some part of the “business revolution” does in fact have a place in the schools.
A Closer Look: Specific Issues

Not surprisingly, the various groups’ views on specific issues tended to reflect their overall differences of opinion. The following sections look at several of those issues: schools and social problems; money; race; and the role of the media.

ISSUE 1: Schools and Social Problems

A recurring issue in the debate over the effectiveness of public education is the impact of negative societal trends on the schools’ ability to educate. Many educators say it is no surprise that so many of today’s students do poorly. They argue that myriad social trends — the breakdown both of the family structure and of organized religion, the effects of crime, drugs and poverty, and an increasingly heterogeneous population — make an educator’s job all but impossible.

The schools, educators say, are not isolated from these forces, and their performance must be assessed with this context in mind. For this reason, they argue, it is not reasonable to compare the achievement of American students to that of students from other industrialized societies whose homogeneous populations face few of these problems. This widely-held perception among educators emerged repeatedly in interviews conducted for this project.

Educator, Priest, Rabbi, and Social Worker

“Every year I find myself wearing more hats and putting out more fires. I’m a priest, I’m a rabbi, I’m a social worker, I’m a father,” said one teacher in the Northeast. Another said, “We’ve become a dumping ground for all of society’s ills.” A third added, “There are more single parents, and we are just overwhelmed. It’s not that [the parents] aren’t concerned, they just can’t do it. You have so many problems now, the alcohol problems, the drug problems; I even had a homeless child. How could I scream at him for being late when he’s riding the bus from a motel for an hour to get here?”

Teachers spoke at length about the problems students brought with them to school. “Every week it’s a matter of overcoming insurmountable problems,” said a Midwestern teacher. “It’s exhausting. What can you do for these kids living on the street — kids whose parents have thrown them out? What can you
do with kids who live with drug abuse and know nothing but drug abuse?" These problems so overwhelmed the classroom effort, she said, that it was "easy to overlook that there are other kids in similar situations who are surviving miraculously and actually doing pretty well in school."

**Executives: Who Should Do the Job?**

"I do believe a lot of educators think that the business community has a lot of idle cash that they should give to education."

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Many business executives also understood that teaching, at times, requires heroics. Said one, from the West Coast, "The idea of a mother at home 30 years ago, raising the family, teaching them as she raised them, does not happen today, and children are getting to school without this kind of teaching. Some of the latchkey children, all they have is a TV set."

While educators tended to believe they had no choice but to take on these additional responsibilities, many business executives were less convinced. Some executives saw educators using these problems as an excuse for their own poor performance. Others said educators should stick to the business of teaching the basics and let other community groups address problems of hunger, homelessness, poverty, inadequate medical care and the like. In this instance, corporate executives tended to apply their own "business thinking" to problems facing the schools. Institutions, they argued, functioned best when they had a clear goal, stuck to that goal, and didn’t allow themselves to be pulled into other directions that they may not be equipped to handle.

For example, one Western administrator pointed out how few choices the schools have when faced with social problems. "You can’t really ask if the schools should say no, because they just can’t. The kid is in the classroom, and you have to get beyond their problems before you can start teaching them. That’s just how it is," she said.

A Northeastern administrator agreed "The school is a reflection of what goes on in the community. If there are conflicts at home, kids bring them into the schools? Schools have to deal with them and it’s critical that we do because there’s no one else there who catches it."

But business executives took a different tack. Longstanding social problems "seem to be multiplying," another executive said, "and someone should be addressing them. But I’m not sure it’s the educators who should be doing it. Maybe society in general should be addressing the problems."

A Western executive agreed. "It doesn’t have to be that schools [deal with all the social problems]. For instance, after-school care need not be run by the schools. It could be run by the city, the county, or the YMCA, or could be contracted out."

An executive from the Midwest questioned the school’s priorities. "Is our primary function to teach social skills or to make sure that we graduate people who can read?"

Schisms between business leaders and educators were also revealed in Public Agenda’s 1992 survey, in which they strongly disagreed on the impact contemporary social problems have on the schools’ ability to educate in the face of these problems. In that survey, 67 percent of teachers and 65 percent of principals strongly agreed that many children come to school with so many problems, it’s difficult for them to be good students. Only 42 percent of businesses executives agreed.

When asked if being "overburdened with social problems" was a very serious problem facing the nation’s schools, 76 percent of principals, 74 percent of teachers, and 71 percent of superintendents said yes. Only 49 percent of businesses executives held this view.

**ISSUE 2: The Symbol of Money**

In interviews conducted for this study, money was a recurring issue, but its invocation was often symbolic. This is not to say that money is not an important issue to schools in
the communities studied. However, what was most striking in this series of interviews was the extent to which educators and business executives often used money as a measurement of their value to the community and society in general. Teachers looked at their salary level as a measure of how the public and community value their profession. Superintendents and school boards looked at the public’s voting on their budget and revenue propositions as indicating public endorsement of their policies.

Some educators viewed the business community’s financial support as a sign of their commitment to education. One Southern business executive was well aware of this. “I do believe a lot of educators think that the business community has a lot of idle cash that they should give to education. I think it might be an obstacle when administrators say, ‘Gee, you’re willing to help but you won’t open up your checkbook for me.’”

Some teachers felt that if society properly valued education, schools would not have the financial problems they do now. Others were concerned that the educational system does not financially reward excellence in education.

At least one Midwestern business executive agreed: “If you’re an especially fine educator, can you make more money? If you put in extra time with the kids because you really want to help a child grow, are you rewarded in any way, or are you supposed to be self-rewarded? The measure of our society is if you work hard at excellence, there’s a reward. This is true except in education, where the lowest common denominator is pretty much it.”

ISSUE 3: Race

Issues involving race were of central importance across the four districts we studied, fundamentally affecting the structure and policies of the districts. To help achieve integration, one district adopted the Princeton plan, which assigns students to schools by grade level instead of geographic proximity. Two others relied on magnet schools to attract white students to minority schools, and another annexed a bordering town after a lengthy period of litigation. One district had devoted substantial financial and human resources to legal battles involving race for more than three decades.

Despite the obvious impact and salience of racial issues, however, we found very little open discussion about them. That is, people easily and comfortably discussed specific programs and policies engendered by racial concerns, but rarely discussed race problems per se.

Southern black parents and educators were the only respondents to openly discuss racial issues, and they often voiced strong dissatisfaction with the educational system’s treatment of black children. Their white counterparts would remain silent when interviewed in the same focus groups. Even when whites were interviewed alone, they would discuss issues involving race very gingerly. Interviewers speculated that the fear of being labeled racist or of saying something inappropriate may explain the hesitancy. But if the four districts studied here are indicative of a national tendency, the American educational system may be currently incapable of open, frank dialogue and discussion about issues driven by race.

Black Parents: Dissatisfied

Many blacks voiced extreme frustration and distrust of the educational system’s approach to their children. Some suspected that programs targeting underachieving kids had the effect of keeping their kids underachieving.

One parent, also a member of the Urban League, said: “I think the model that we have in public education as a whole and the way that we educate is increasingly less workable [for people of color] than it has been at any point in history. And students of color have become a much larger percentage, so it’s more glaring.”
One black parent from the South said that minority parents “think their kids are throw-away kids. They think the system really doesn’t care whether their kids achieve or not and that, at any point, it will try and find reasons to put them into an alternative program or to push them into special education. People tend to think the education system has very low expectations, particularly for kids of color, that there is racism, that kids of color are treated differently in the system.”

Another Southern black parent said, “I just don’t believe that, as a whole, the bigwigs who really run this town are ready for disparities [between black and white students] to be bridged. If we get rid of all of that, then we won’t have anything to have any grievance about.”

Achievement and Demography

Both whites and minorities routinely resorted to a demographic analysis of academic achievement by race to measure progress or the need for progress. Educators compared white and minority achievement levels to determine which schools and which students need more resources and to pinpoint weak spots. Black parents and activists also used demographic comparisons to demonstrate how the system is not meeting their children’s needs.

Nevertheless, there was clear bitterness among some blacks over being the focus of targeted, remedial efforts. The bitterness may have resulted from how such efforts are undertaken (if an overzealous, insensitive or racist administrator insults minority parents, for example) or from disagreement over which policies should be pursued (e.g., the very act of targeting minority children who are not achieving, rather than trying to integrate them).

One Southern black parent had this to say: “When a [white] principal stands up in the auditorium, where there are black, yellow, red, brown — all kinds of kids, and says to black parents and everybody else there, ‘my black boys are keeping my scores down, this is where my problems are,’ that’s bad. That’s bad.”

A business executive, also black, found racism to be pervasive. “The perception of
institutional racism in the district offices is to me overwhelming. Institutional racism is when one has the feeling that the good old boy network is intact, that it is a white male-run system and that it stays that way. Leadership comes from the top; racism comes from the top.

ISSUE 4: Media and the Schools

Across the four sites, mass media coverage of education and the schools proved to be a highly charged issue, one on which virtually all parties agreed. Parents, teachers and principals were especially bitter, distrustful and cynical about media coverage of their schools.

The Bad-News Bias

The recurring complaint voiced across all districts was the “bad-news bias” of media coverage. It seemed to parents, teachers and principals that the media relished splashing the crime, drug and academic problems of their districts on the front page. On the other hand, they complained, the media would bury good news in the back pages of the paper — if they reported good news at all. According to this view, negative media coverage accounted for much of the negative image citizens — especially those without kids or other contact with schools — had of public education.

A Midwestern principal put it simply: “If there’s a positive event, you don’t read or hear about it. But there was a student walkout, and the press was over there every day with cameras. Media tend to report more negative things.” A Southern parent said, “Negativism just feeds and feeds and feeds. I had to call the paper for three days to find out when they were going to announce [our local] National Merit semi-finalists.”

Teachers in the Northeast angrily related a story illustrating the media’s “good-news blind spot.” In the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict, with rioting across the nation, a basketball game in their district between racially diverse teams, cheered on by a racially diverse audience, went off without a hitch. Proceeds from the game were dedicated to a black student who was injured in what may have been a bias incident. What seemed to be a poignant and timely example of community solidarity went uncovered by the media. One teacher concluded that, while the media “always” report on knives being confiscated in schools and other bad news, “they never report on good stuff.”

In one of the districts, many respondents said that a newspaper war between the city’s two daily papers had caused both papers to escalate their disparaging and negative coverage of public education in their district. To sell more newspapers, they believed, both papers converged on a visible and vulnerable target about which the public cared. An administrator from that district said that during the newspaper war, “If we had a stabbing at a school... we would not only see one story on one day, but two days and two stories or several stories, because the newspapers would provide more versions of the story to attract more readers, and the schools suffered during that period because we were used to create readership. We noticed immediately after [one paper] folded that reporters were not nearly as aggressive in pursuing the school’s issues as they had been.”

Others thought the problem was with the public, rather than the newspapers or reporters themselves. Bad news — sensational and provocative — was destined to impress and stick with public perceptions, while good news was easily forgotten.
Educators: Education Reporters Don’t Measure Up

Several respondents traced the media coverage problem to the mediocrity of reporters assigned to cover education issues. Education reporters were sometimes believed to be the lowest people on the media’s totem pole. According to this view, these reporters were typically new and inexperienced, striving to learn and struggling to move to more prestigious beats.

An assistant superintendent from the Northeast said he had been through a “tremendous number” of education reporters over the years. “There are good reporters and there are reporters who are looking to win a Pulitzer with some exposé. I had also always understood that the education beat was low on the totem pole, so we got the rookies. And some of the issues we face are complex. The jargon we use may not be understood. And when rookies attend school board meetings, they may misrepresent the sense of the meeting because they didn’t understand it or because they left before it was over.”

Again, blame was placed at least partly with the press. But a Southern parent said negative press was a reflection of the community’s negativity. “There are lots of educational options here, and I think the way a lot of people make themselves feel better is to talk very negatively and exaggerate the negativism in the school system. And the press picks up on that. They perpetuate the most sensationalized perspective of what goes on in the schools, but they never go down to the schools.”

A Western teacher agreed. “When there’s a gun in a high school, the average citizen starts to believe there’s one in every school. They believe what they see on TV.”

Superintendents Working Well with Media

Compared to teachers, principals and parents, superintendents had a more positive relationship with the media. School superintendents agreed that the media had a bad-news bias. One said, “If you don’t have any affiliation with [the schools] at all, you tend to reflect what you see on TV or read in the paper. The news media tend to deal more with the attention-grabbing stories, where something’s wrong rather than something’s right.”

But the tone and approach of superintendents toward the media was analytic and dispassionate, reflecting their confidence that they could influence its content. One superintendent said, “Anything of value that happens, I make sure that gets in the papers.” Another said of negative news coverage, “I’m not bitter or sad about it, because I understand how the media work. I see them as an ally, not as an opponent. If you are open and share information and provide real access for reporters, overall, they’ll give you a fair shake.”

Superintendents were also more likely to believe they could counteract the negative impact of ordinary coverage. Their comments on the media reflected confidence. One superintendent described his approach this
way: “To overcome [negative] perceptions, you have to do several things. Some of them are common sense. Your best ambassadors are the people [in the news stories]: the students, the teachers, the administrators. We try to be proactive in that respect. . . . No one wants to put any money into public relations for the schools. My style is to do a lot of it myself. I have my own live TV show once a month where I take telephone calls. We need to do some proactive things to improve our image.”

Another superintendent described a similar approach: “I am probably in the paper five days a week. A headline at least a couple of times a week. Radio interviews a couple of times a week. I’ve been on one talk show and I’m going on another next week. So there’s an intense interest in media focus. I like it and I do it well. If you can establish a good rapport with the media, you can start answering questions the way you want them answered so that you can make great impressions for the district. I’ve never had trouble with the media. They have a deadline. They want a quote and if you call them back they’re always grateful. I’d rather have them have my quote than someone else’s.”

At least one media person agreed that superintendents had better relations with the media than teachers: “That’s true across the board. Any time you dissect any interest group, the leaders often have it figured out. They’ve figured the media can be manipulated, can be dealt with, can be helped and so forth. It’s the rank and file that they represent that don’t understand and want to blame the media for what’s going on.”

A Midwestern union official blamed both the schools and the media: “I think [schools] are as culpable as the media in that the schools are lousy communicators. They are lousy reporters of what they’re doing.”

**PTA: Need to Balance Media Bias**

Some PTA parents and others felt there was a need to counteract the media’s negativity about the schools in their community. Other stakeholders agreed the schools needed to take the initiative to offset negative media coverage. A PTA parent from the South said, “In the school district, we need to change that [negative] public image. We see it coming, but we won’t do anything about it. Then when it hits the paper and the switchboard and everyone starts to holler, the administration is busy trying to do a patch job on it instead of dealing with it when it first raised its ugly head.”

Another Southern parent said she recognized the need to be proactive: “If you want something positive, you have to really push for it. That ultimately goes back to the public, because I think the negative is what sells papers and that is not what we want. So, as the public, we have to press for [the media] to say positive things.”

A third parent seemed surprised by the need to be proactive. “I had to call the paper for three days to find out when they were going to announce [the National Merit winners]. The paper knows me; I’m always real polite. You almost have to do that to make sure they’re going to print the good news. You have to invite them to the science fair because that’s something good. They’ll be there in a flash if there’s a fight.”
This Public Agenda study was designed to go beyond the wealth of survey findings on education reform, and gather, at some length and with some specificity, the views of Americans working in the schools — and working to improve the schools — on a day-to-day basis. We found a great deal of intelligence and desire for change. But we also found divisions, fissures, resentments and misunderstandings that make education reform a precarious undertaking.

In all four communities, groups that should work together — groups that must work together if there is to be progress — seemed continually pulled apart by suspicion, by prejudice, and by fear of losing hard-won gains. In conversation after conversation, talk about long-term goals descended almost immediately into talk about local politics, local disputes, who did what to whom, and how to prevent it the next time around. If this study indicates national trends, Americans angered by gridlock in Washington may find an equally intractable gridlock much closer to home.

All four communities, all with good school systems, were bedeviled by poor communications and a tendency to lose sight of the common good in the effort to protect a variety of special interests. Teachers resented administrators whose idea of communicating was a two-page memo. Administrators were frustrated by rivalries among schools and divisive union disputes and regulations. Superintendents tired of efforts to “make peace” among squabbling parties. Parents tried to improve the schools, but often settled for protecting their own kids. Too many business people came with quick answers, and when their answers weren’t accepted, they left just as quickly.

There are no simple fixes for any of these problems. But this study suggests that there is a formidable challenge that education reformers must take more seriously — one that is underrated, underfunded and sometimes completely ignored. The challenge is to address the political side — the “human side” — of education reform more directly, more effectively and more persistently.

Good ideas about curricula, textbooks, tests, financing and governance will founder if the parties who must implement them cannot get along. In some respects, education reformers who turn their attention away from local communications and local politics may be risking the same unhappy fate as the political candidate who has “the right stands” on the issues, but fails to rally the public to the cause.

Seriously addressing the politics of education reform is a major undertaking.
Clearly, the kinds of resentments and misunderstandings identified in this study will not disappear overnight, nor can they be ignored in the hope that a good idea will save the day. They will require sustained attention, candid communications, and a genuine willingness to listen and learn.

**Three Dead-End Paths**

Based on this study’s findings, people who want change in the schools may be tempted to follow three unproductive paths.

First, the problems will not be solved if participants try to distance themselves from the politics of reform. In this age of sound bites and gridlock, politics has gotten a bad name. It is understandable that citizens would want to have as little as possible to do with this eight-letter word. But that also would be a fatal mistake.

After all, politics is how change occurs, how disputes are mediated, and how consensus is reached. The challenge is to keep politics from descending into pettiness and parochialism.

Second, they might invest enormous energy and resources in communications when an initiative is introduced, but then “check the job off the list” after the first burst of activity. This is precisely what many educators resent — the grand unveiling of a “reform du jour” followed by a return to business as usual.

The third no-win strategy is to assume that poor communications and local political gridlock are merely “public relations problems” that can be fixed with the right slogan or attention-grabbing press release, or by accentuating the positive and pretending that the downside doesn’t exist. This kind of strategy serves only to further isolate and antagonize those on the front lines, especially teachers. The fears and resentments are real, the patterns of suspicion and skepticism are well-established and deeply entrenched. They cannot be papered over with rhetoric.

Disagreement is natural and healthy. What struck us about these four communities, however, was the level of bitterness, suspicion and hostility among the parties. At the very least, these attitudes are a major distraction to the task of building communitywide consensus around school reform.

For that to occur in the future, there must be candid and continuing conversations among educators at all levels, among educators and parents, and among the schools and the business community. The problem in getting education reform is not that malevolent individuals or groups stand in the way of progress. Rather, stakeholders seem to be locked in a hyperactive, self-centered process they do not like but are powerless to control. There is a critical need for a different kind of political process, one that allows the general interest of communities to prevail over the narrow interests that currently dominate. And more importantly, all parties must never lose sight of the underlying common purpose of their efforts: What we must do to help children learn. And how we will work together to do it.
Methodology

In addition to selecting districts that had some experience with reform, we wanted our four sites to reflect diversity in geographic location. To achieve geographic diversity, one of the four districts selected was in the South, another in the Northeast, another in the Midwest and another in the West. District size was also a factor we took into consideration — one district was small, with a student population of less than 5,000, a second had about 25,000 students, a third served nearly 50,000 students and a fourth had over 100,000 students.

From June to November 1992 over 200 interviews were conducted by Public Agenda researchers, who held to a consistent but flexible interview format. We wanted participants to tell us their stories in their way, to refer to their perceptions of critical moments in their districts’ history and relationships and to address specific issues we had identified as critical. In preparation for our field research we interviewed several national reform leaders and conducted general background research on the districts.

We approached the districts by making contact with several key stakeholders in each site. Superintendents would open the door to other administrators and principals; principals or teachers union officials would open the door to teachers; leaders in the business community would open the door to other business executives; heads of PTA’s would connect us with active parents. Although we had anticipated that identifying the key players would be difficult, this proved to be a straightforward task — most are well-known to each other or were even listed as members of groups involved in education. In most of our interviews we asked for suggestions on other individuals we might interview, expanding our list until we had identified the key active personalities in the district. We very quickly developed comprehensive lists of names for each community. We approached prospective interviewees with a letter describing Public Agenda, and the purpose of the project, and guaranteeing their own confidentiality and that of their district. We would then follow up with phone calls to further explain our project and to set up appointments for interviews. We visited each site from three to five times.

Interviews with superintendents and other central office administrators, principals, business executives and school board members were conducted one-on-one and in person. Active parents and teachers were interviewed in focus groups. With the exception of one teacher focus group that refused to be recorded, all interviews and focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed. Although some individuals would have been happy to “go on record” with us, for others the promise of confidentiality was critical to gaining trust and ensuring frank discussion. We therefore promised to keep all names and districts confidential.
Other Education Publications Available from the Public Agenda Foundation

Educational Reform: The Players and the Politics
Steve Farkas. This report is based on a mail survey conducted by Public Agenda in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation between January and March 1992. Diverse groups with a stake in education were surveyed by mail using systematic random sampling: teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members and, in the private sector, business executives from major corporations. The study reports consensus among the groups over the goals of K-12 education but strong differences in their evaluations of the performance of the schools. There are also fundamental disagreements over the scope and root of the problems and how to approach their solution. 1992. 21pp. Price: $8.50

Crosstalk: The Public, The Experts, and Competitiveness
John Immerwahr, Jean Johnson, and Adam Kernan-Schloss. Published in cooperation with the Business-Higher Education Forum, this report examines public attitudes about competitiveness, education and technology in the workplace. The report identifies a serious gap between the way leaders view these issues and the way the general public thinks about them. Based on a review of survey data from the last decade and focus groups conducted to learn why there has been so little public enthusiasm for leaders' efforts to reform education and upgrade worker training. 1991. 22pp. Price: $17.50

Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts
Steve Farkas. Study of educational reform efforts in four communities based on over 200 face-to-face interviews with teachers, administrators, principals, board members and local parents and business people active in the schools. 1993. 32pp. Price: $10.00

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