

PUBLIC AGENDA

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PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION

A White Paper Prepared for The Ford Foundation by Public Agenda

Dr. Will Friedman and Aviva Gutnick, with Jackie Danzberger

Fall 1999

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INTRODUCTION

Public engagement has become a buzzword in education reform, and who could argue with ideas such as “building community support,” “improving communication,” and “creating collaborations between educators, parents and the wider community?” But if public engagement is to become more than the latest reform fad and truly benefit the nation’s students, schools and communities, important questions of theory and practice need to be addressed. What are the various interpretations of the term? How *should* public engagement be defined, or, at least, what are its more useful definitions and the more problematic ones? What are the practical hurdles to, and most promising strategies for, successful public engagement? And what impacts can successful public engagement have?

With funding from The Ford Foundation, this white paper on public engagement in education tackles these and other related questions. While the paper reflects the thinking and experience of a variety of practitioners, it draws most heavily on Public Agenda’s hands-on experience. For 25 years, Public Agenda has closely examined how the public reacts to complex policy issues, how public opinion evolves over time, and how citizens can grapple effectively with tough issues amid the swirl of the latest policy debate.

For several years we have worked intensively on public engagement in education in particular, and

often in partnership with the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL). While there are many important strategies and activities that can help engage the public in school improvement, from the dissemination of school report cards to the use of the Internet, our work has focused most centrally on community dialogue, and on the new attitudes, partnerships and activities such dialogue can generate.

This work has involved community-based projects from urban settings (Brooklyn, Hartford and San Jose) to rural ones (Grand Island, Nebraska), and places in between (Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and Gray-New Gloucester, Maine). Some of our projects have been purely local affairs, some have involved statewide initiatives and others have been national in scope. We have worked with professional networks, such as the Danforth Foundation’s Forum for the American Superintendent and the National Education Associations Center for the Advancement of Public Education, as well as with grassroots organizations ranging from local education funds to volunteer parent groups. This experience has clarified, we believe, a number of principles and strategies that can lead to successful public engagement, as well as common mistakes and pitfalls to avoid. This white paper draws on these lessons in the hope they will prove useful to others.

I. WHY PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION IS NEEDED

How important *is* public engagement – which for now we can loosely define as efforts to involve all sectors of a community in ongoing deliberation to build common ground and collaboration? What follows are examples of two recent school reform movements and the role of public engagement, or lack thereof, in their development. One is the rise and fall of outcomes-based education in the early- to mid-1990s. The other is standards-based reform, which dominates much of the current debate.

The Case of Outcomes-based Education

Outcomes-based education could have been a wonderful vehicle for productive local and national dialogue about the ends and means of education rather than what it became: the third rail of education reform. The story of this failed reform is a powerful argument for a more deliberative and engaged public in American education and a profoundly instructive example to those who seek to make that a reality.¹

One reason OBE could have been an excellent vehicle for engaging the public is that it proceeded from an easily understood and popular premise: Students should demonstrate they have learned what

it is they were supposed to have learned in school. Education reform would thus put its primary focus on results, or outcomes, whereas the traditional focus of reform had been on inputs, meaning teachers, resources, textbooks and the like.

This premise had bipartisan support among elites. Both the Bush and Clinton administrations, for instance, incorporated outcomes-based reform in their education programs. And, it rang true with the general public. For example, in 1994, about the time that battles over OBE were heating up, a majority of the general public favored such OBE-related concepts as, “Not allowing kids to graduate unless they clearly demonstrate they can write and speak English well,” and, “Setting up very clear guidelines on what kids should learn and teachers should teach in every major subject so the kids and the teachers will know what to aim for.”²

Another reason why OBE was ripe for public engagement was that it involved big, interesting and important questions about the ends and means of education. Unfortunately, these questions were answered by policy makers with too little regard for the values, concerns and understanding of citizens. As a result, the answers were often far from what

¹ This section is not meant as an argument for or against OBE as policy, but rather as a critique of the OBE policy process. A better process would not have guaranteed that OBE proponents would have prevailed, just that the debate would have been less destructive and more instructive. That said, there is reason to believe that, at minimum, major elements of the OBE approach would have remained intact, because the core ideas were of great interest to educators and the general public alike, as the discussion will explain. Indeed, elements of OBE have remained intact within the standards-based reform movement, although no one attaches the OBE label to them anymore.

² On the reaction of elites to OBE, see Peter Shrag, “The New School Wars: How Outcomes-Based Education Blew Up,” *The American Prospect*, Winter 1995. Also, see Bruno Manno, who writes, “OBE began with a good, common sense idea. We should judge the quality of education by focusing on outputs – on what students learn and on measurable academic results. ...Focusing on results won widespread support from elected officials...and lay people” (“The New School Wars: Battles Over Outcomes-Based Education,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 1995). The survey results are from Jean Johnson and John Immerwahr, *First Things First*, Public Agenda, 1994.

most people had in mind when they thought of a results-oriented approach to school reform.

Derailing OBE

Instead of focusing on core academic subjects, where there was some workable consensus about the kinds of skills and knowledge schools ought to be imparting, policy makers began jamming more under the OBE umbrella than it could reasonably accommodate. Consider the following examples from two state OBE plans:

- An Ohio graduate should be able “to function as a responsible family member and maintain physical, emotional, and social well-being.”
- In Minnesota, the graduate will demonstrate “the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential to...develop physical and emotional well-being.”³

Undoubtedly, these were crafted with the best of intentions, and we would all want to see students who are able “to function as a responsible family member,” and the like. Several things, however, were eating away at the common ground underlying OBE that could have been avoided through good public engagement.

First, OBE began to take on issues more contentious than core academic concerns, and this became a red flag to people worried about values entering the curriculum. Consequently, what could have been an effective vehicle for reform instead became a political football. A public engagement approach would have alerted policy makers to this dynamic early in the process and averted a great deal of grief.

Second, the inclusion of affective and social goals likely weakened the support for OBE among people who may have been sympathetic to those goals, but who could not envision them working within an OBE context. OBE applies most easily to results that are easiest to quantify, and the expanded agenda included many items that became nonsensical when quantified. Again, a public engagement approach could have clarified this dynamic and helped policy makers adjust sooner.

Last, the answers to the question, “How should educational outcomes be defined?” were presented in the worst possible manner – either overly broad and vague or freighted with jargon instead of plain language. Even the term “OBE” conveys nothing, and therefore becomes an excellent blank screen on which anything can be, and in fact was, projected. Because authentic efforts at public engagement impose the discipline of translating technical and bureaucratic language into terms the public can readily work with, this problem would have been avoided as well.

OBE in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania’s encounter with OBE illustrates these pitfalls well. In the early 1970s, a Pennsylvania commission appointed by the governor issued a report urging major curriculum changes, including the recommendation for learning outcomes. Nothing happened with that recommendation until 1991, when the state Department of Education renewed the idea, issuing an initial list of more than 500 specific outcomes. In so doing, it became the first in the nation to mandate OBE as state policy

³ Manno, *ibid.*

The list addressed independent and collaborative learning, adaptation to change, ethics, citizenship, ecology, math, science and technology, arts and humanities, health and appreciating others. Plan supporters said it pushed the state to the forefront of the education reform movement.

But critics derided a state bureaucracy for overreaching its mission, being out of touch with real people and succumbing to political correctness. Their focus was the expanded concept of schooling stated in the outcomes, particularly those involving values. They contended that the state, through its new assessment system, was intruding into students' private lives by gathering too much personal information. A grassroots coalition with ties to conservative interest groups held more than 100 town meetings across the state, often with its members debating a state education representative on stage.

State officials said the barrage of detailed questions about OBE painted a program they hardly recognized. "It was clear from the beginning that what we thought we were doing was not what they thought we were doing," according to a veteran state administrator. With meager results in defending its program and flagging support in the legislature, state education officials went on the attack, defining the primary opposition as a group of right-wing radicals. Name-calling erupted on both sides. As the issue went before the legislature, tensions peaked. Some lawmakers were wary of speaking out on behalf of the new policy because the opposition was so "vicious

and personal" in its attacks, according to one former legislative aide.⁴

In 1993, the state House voted to kill OBE outright, barring the Department of Education from ever ordering school districts to test students on personal values, morals or other non-academic subjects. A group of legislators and state administrators, however, hammered out a modified version of OBE with 53 academic outcomes, which, although still controversial, guided teaching throughout the state for five years.

Some top state officials later defended their strategy of branding opponents as zealots solely interested in beating up on public schools, not improving them, saying it was the only way to put the debate in its proper perspective. Others felt, in retrospect, that investing in a more inclusive approach early would have avoided a great deal of wasted energy later. Ron Cowell, for example, the former chairman of the House Education Committee, later admitted that, "To some extent we were dumb. ... The Department of Education has done a miserable job explaining what this is all about." He added that the state erred by not including a wider circle of people when planning the reform changes and should have built a coalition of support involving others besides the typical education stakeholders. Opponents meanwhile also said they would have done things differently, by sitting down and "being taken seriously. That's fair government and equal debate."⁵

⁴Lonnie Harp, "Rebel Mom," *Teacher Magazine*, October 1993. More constructive forms of education town meetings will be discussed at great length later in the paper.

⁵Matthew P. Smith and Marylynn Pitz, "Blunders in Fight for OBE Admitted," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 16, 1993; and "State House Votes to Kill OBE Plan," UPI, Feb. 8, 1993.

Taking Stock

The case of OBE, in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, exemplifies a kind of anti-dialogue. People were dictated to, not spoken with, and what people *did* hear did not always make much sense to them. The result was that an overly bureaucratic process of decision making became an overly politicized process, both of which cut the public *out* of the process. Or, as one observer put it, “In the face of such [political] heat, and in the absence of vigorous centrist forces speaking for parents, it’s not surprising that politicians and school bureaucrats tend to capitulate easily.”⁶ Public engagement helps create just such a “vigorous centrist force” – which should not be confused with wishy-washy, lowest-common-denominator solutions. Rather, public engagement’s promise is in people reaching across lines of interest and background to work out solutions with which they all can live and to which they all can contribute.

The Case of Standards-based Reform

In contrast to OBE – and undoubtedly, in part, as a result of it –many attempts at standards reform have included serious efforts to include the public in the policy debate.

The concept of across-the-board learning standards harkens back to at least 1894, when an eminent group of educators, named the Committee of Ten, called for establishing academic curriculum for *all* high school students. Though the proposal was defeated by those worried that common requirements would force some students to drop out, the idea of standards had been thrust into the public forum.

⁶Manno, 1995.

The first step toward the academic standards movement of today was taken in 1983, when the National Commission on Excellence in Education announced that, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might as well have viewed it as an act of war.” The commission reported that other countries’ schools were doing better in both overall quality and in equity across the system, and ours were losing ground on both, and further said that all high school students needed a common core curriculum.⁷

In 1989, President Bush and the nation’s governors met in Virginia to launch a movement for national education goals, setting the stage for the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994. Congress established the bipartisan National Council on Education Standards and Testing, which recommended the development of voluntary education standards and tests.

In contrast to the narrow circle of policy making that resulted in the OBE debacle, advocates of standards-based reform have tended to hold that, “Policy makers should use a broad-based, participatory, consensus-building process to develop outcome standards. This bottom-up process should include educators, parents and community leaders.”⁸

Standards Reform in Nebraska

⁷Paul Gagnon, “What Should Children Learn,” *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1995.

⁸*Promises to Keep: Creating High Standards for American Students*, Washington, D.C.: National Education Goals Panel, November 1993.

One such example took place in Nebraska throughout 1997. The effort began with an inquiry from Dr. Douglas Christensen, Nebraska's Commissioner of Education, about how Public Agenda might aid the state Board of Education in gauging the public's interest in statewide academic standards. The board, a regionally elected body, had drafted some standards but was split over whether to continue developing them, and how to implement them if completed.

The board was already attempting to engage citizens on the question of statewide standards through regional "listening sessions" in which board members held public hearings around the state. These sessions, it turned out, were often dominated by a small group of local activists who traveled hundreds of miles to express in the strongest possible terms their view that creating statewide standards would be the first step down a slippery slope of state and then federal intrusion into the rightful decision making of communities.⁹

These activists were, of course, perfectly within their rights to forward their views, and certainly they were valid contributors to the public debate. The problem, from a public engagement standpoint, was that it was impossible to tell whether those views were widely shared, or how they might evolve if part of a broader conversation. The strategies being employed did not permit the board to hear more than the most

organized, most active voices. Again, these voices *should* have been heard, just not to the exclusion of other citizens. How, then, to reach out, engage more people, generate a wider dialogue and gain a deeper appreciation of the public's concerns, values and perspectives?

Public Agenda, in partnership with the Institute for Educational Leadership, suggested a combination of focus groups and community forums, the latter organized according to the *Public Conversations About the Public's Schools* model that our organizations had developed and tested over the previous two years. As will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper, the *Public Conversations* strategy involves the following key elements:

- Sponsorship and organization by local community groups, such as a parents groups, a school system or a chamber of commerce, typically in combination.
- Sustained outreach to varied segments of the community to ensure that a wide spectrum of local stakeholders and viewpoints are represented, including parents, teachers, students, residents without children in school, employers and clergy.
- Small, moderated group discussions in which all parties are given equal opportunity to participate. (While we often aim for 100 or so participants in a given forum, the majority of the time is spent in small sessions of about 15 people each.)
- Carefully prepared nonpartisan discussion materials that present fundamental choices, arguments and proposals about the issue at hand

⁹ This case study is based on Public Agenda's and the IEL's work on behalf of the Nebraska State Department of Education. Additional details may be found in two papers available from Public Agenda: Will Friedman, *Nebraskans' Views on School Standards: A Focus Group Study*, 1997, and Will Friedman and Jacqueline Danzberger, *Nebraskans Speak Out on Academic Standards: "Public Engagement Report"*, 1997.

and do so in a manner easily accessible to the average citizen¹⁰

Over the course of a year, eight focus groups and six community conversations were held across the state, from Lincoln to Norfolk to Scottsbluff. In many instances, state board members attended the forums as observers (not participants, as the idea was to listen to the public's views). The organizing method allowed board members and others to hear more from "regular citizens," rather than the professional educators or activists who had tended to dominate the board's earlier public sessions.

In one instance, about 15 of the activists who had been following the issue found their way – some driving hundreds of miles – to the session held in Grand Island sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce and school district. Because the forum was intended as a local affair, it seemed possible to bar them from the proceedings on those grounds. We've found, however, that it's always best to be more inclusive rather than less, so we advised the local organizers to invite them in and disperse them among the five small diverse groups, which had been constructed from the pre-registered participants. This strategy resulted in having three out-of-towners in each group, for about 18 participants in each. These folks expressed their views strongly and challenged the moderators, but in no case did they dominate the

proceedings to the extent that others felt they could not participate and share their own views. In one group, for example, it was clear to the moderator that the activists gradually softened as the evening wore on. And it clearly registered across the group as a minor triumph when one of the activists announced in the end-of-discussion summary that while there were disagreements about how to handle statewide standards, the participants had at least "agreed to disagree."

The results of the focus groups and community conversations were presented to the state board in writing and at a public meeting that received media attention. The major themes were the following:

- Participants favored rigorous academic standards as important to helping students learn.
- Most participants thought there should be consistent core academic standards across the state and supported some form of them, the major reason being the mobility of the modern family.
- Overall, people responded favorably to examples of standards from the board's draft document and thought the board was on the right track.
- While there was considerable support for statewide standards, there were also widely shared areas of concern, as well as pockets of strong resistance to the idea. These concerns centered mainly on issues of assessment and accountability, local control, and fear of unwarranted school budget cuts, although most

¹⁰There is more to the *Public Conversations* strategy, and further details will be added later. The strategy was first reported in articles by Jacqueline Danzberger and Will Friedman, "Public Conversations About the Public's Schools: The Public Agenda/Institute for Educational Leadership Town Meeting Project;" Sue Van Slyke, "Building Community for Public Schools: Challenges and Strategies;" and Deborah Wadsworth, "Building a Strategy for Successful Public Engagement," all in *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 1997.



were willing to address them as statewide standards reform moved ahead.

Additionally, recommendations were made for continued public engagement on standards reform as the board's thinking evolved. Public Agenda continued to support Nebraska's efforts by moderating a meeting of stakeholders from across the state who reviewed the next generation of standards.

This process of public engagement was not, by any means, a perfect one. For instance, it did too little to build local capacity for continued community dialogue, something Public Agenda and IEL normally take great pains to accomplish in *Public Conversations* projects. But the process clearly allowed a larger number and greater variety of citizens to engage the issues than would otherwise have been the case, and consequently the state board and the commissioner heard from a wider array of citizens than they had managed to do before. As a result, the board decided to move ahead with the development of voluntary statewide standards and mandatory statewide assessments. According to Commissioner Christensen, the public engagement process was crucial to progress, which he said, "would have been dead in the water otherwise." In effect, the process helped the board resolve its internal conflicts by including the public's deliberations in the policy process.

Nebraska's standards were ultimately published in an accessible, widely disseminated document titled *L.E.A.R.N.S.: Leading Educational Achievement through Rigorous Nebraska Standards*, published in partnership with the *Omaha World-Herald* and posted

on the state Department of Education's Web site. The document's introduction, by Kathleen McCallister, President of the State Board of Education, and Commissioner Christensen, highlights the centrality of the public engagement process to the development of the standards.

People across the state helped develop the standards through extensive public hearings. We conducted focus groups and town hall meetings statewide, providing many opportunities for people to comment on the standards. In addition, parents and educators worked together to draft standards for us to review.

The standards were the result of three years of hard work and lots of discussion as we reviewed public comments and task force drafts of the standards. Importantly, in the introduction the Board President and Commissioner treat the standards document not only as a culmination of public discussion, but also as a new beginning:

This document is a tool for students, educators, parents, the public and policy makers to guide schools to provide the best possible education for all Nebraska students. We do not intend for the standards to limit local school decisions about the education of the students they serve. In fact, *we hope the standards encourage communitywide discussions about what teachers should teach and students should learn.*

The standards should be viewed as *a work in progress with much work to be done by local communities as they engage in conversations about the importance of education and the kinds of schools they need to reach higher standards.* (Italics added)

Taking Stock

The example of Nebraska's approach to standards-based reform offers a sharp contrast to OBE, and shows the promise of the public and policy makers working more closely together. Not all states have done as much as Nebraska to engage the public in the formation of standards, but most seem to be doing considerably more than was the case with OBE. Most states seem, at the very least, to be focusing their efforts on core academics, where a broad consensus exists, rather than on controversial values and character goals.¹¹ And most are attempting to disseminate their new standards widely and communicate them clearly. Although such efforts hardly exhaust the potential for public engagement, they are at least steps in the right direction.

In many districts and communities, citizens and educators are past the point of talking about standards *creation*, which in many instances is a *fait accompli*, and are dealing instead with questions of response and implementation. Public Agenda and IEL have been involved in a series of community conversations in San Jose; Rochester; Brooklyn's Crown Heights and East New York neighborhoods; Cobb County, Georgia; and Bridgeport, Connecticut; among many others, that ask, "How can schools, families and the wider community do a better job of

¹¹This includes Pennsylvania, which in early 1999, approved new academic standards in math, reading and writing for students in grades 3, 5, 8 and 11, avoiding the values and character issues that had become so contentious during the OBE era. The suggestion here is not, it should be clear, that values should be avoided just because they are controversial. The point is that treating them as measurable outcomes is a completely different proposition for the public than is the case with core academic subjects, and that needs to be considered carefully.

working together to help students meet new academic standards?" Such dialogues have resulted in parent involvement initiatives, expanded district communications and new partnerships between schools and community groups, as case studies later in the paper will explain in greater detail.

The Case for Public Engagement

The histories of OBE and standards-based reform illustrate the importance of engaging the public in efforts at school improvement. For although there is no shortage of worthy ideas on improving schools, there is, too often, the lack of political will necessary to turn good ideas into reality and sustain change. Where common ground and collective effort are needed, the nation's schools have instead become battlegrounds of clashing priorities, perspectives and agendas. Is it essential to American democracy that most children be educated in a system of public schools, or can the republic thrive even if many children attend private schools through publicly financed vouchers? Should rigorous academics be the focus for *all* students or should a more technical and jobs-oriented curriculum be developed for some? Which will best help our youth learn: the tried and true methods of yesterday or more innovative techniques? How can communities best ensure safe schools, and how should concerns for safety, order and discipline be balanced against the civil rights of students and the desire to create an open learning environment? In essence, what are the most important purposes of American education and how can those purposes best be realized?

The presence of these and many other important questions has, unfortunately, rarely led to a productive debate that propels knowledge, action and better results. More often it has devolved into some combination of shouting, sloganeering and a technical and jargon-laden debate among educators and experts. The result: The public is left out, without a real voice, and, consequently, with a diminishing stake in the system.

The need for public engagement can also be seen in the many symptoms of the public's growing disengagement from the public schools, from chronic budget battles to mounting voucher legislation, to parents and other community members who feel not only dissatisfied with but disconnected from their local schools. This sentiment has appeared in surveys, where a majority of public school parents say they would put their children in private school if they had the financial wherewithal to do so.¹²

Parents who give this response in surveys are simply looking for the best way to care for their children. If they cannot do so by affecting the system in place and seeing their concerns addressed and their values taken into account, it is natural they will look to other options. As David Mathews writes in *Is There a Public for Public Schools?*:

“...while Americans believe the country needs public schools, they are torn between a sense of duty to support these schools and a responsibility to do what is

best for children. They are ambivalent and agonize over the dilemma. And, however reluctantly, many are deciding that public schools aren't best for their children or anyone else's.”¹³

Parents who feel this way, it should be noted, are not simplistically blaming the public schools for all of the problems confronting today's students. People recognize that social problems present formidable educational challenges requiring a community as well as a school response – another reason why public engagement is crucial. Violence, drugs, teen pregnancy and poverty are all problems derived from the social conditions of students that limit schools. And while schools should not use those as excuses for poor performance, it is neither fair nor realistic to think that schools can adequately address such problems without help – and even leadership – from the home and community.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the case for public engagement is made by an increasing body of research that shows direct links between engaged families and communities and student success. The family piece of the puzzle has been more thoroughly studied, and, as one summary of the research concludes, “When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life. When parents are involved in their children's education at home, their children do better in school, and the schools they go to are better.” And a recent study of the community aspect found that students tend to do best in

¹²See Jean Johnson, *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*, Public Agenda, 1995, as well as Public Agenda's forthcoming study on vouchers, *On Thin Ice*.

¹³ David Mathews, *Is There a Public for Public Schools?*, Kettering Foundation Press, 1996, p. 3.

communities with high levels of “social capital,” that is, “high levels of civic engagement, reciprocity and trust.”¹⁴

If we conclude that in important ways successful schools hinge on an engaged public, how can this be achieved? The conditions under which citizens can play a meaningful role in school improvement are rarely encountered in the natural course of affairs, or the problem wouldn't exist. School board meetings are not forums where citizens can easily speak with one another, compare perceptions and argue the merits of different courses of action. Districts rarely offer much more than open school nights, bake sales and bond levies as avenues of involvement. PTA meetings are often narrowly focused and not typically geared toward the 75% of the community without school-age children, and in any event, membership is down.

These are not problems exclusive to the nation's schools. In many areas of American public life participation has been eroding as cynicism and mistrust rise. For example, only 39% of eligible voters cast ballots in the 1998 general election, down about 7% from the 1994 general election, and down almost 25% over the last three decades. The problem of the public's disengagement from the public schools is thus a particular manifestation of a broader social problem. But it seems likely that re-engaging the

public in the life of our schools is as crucial a place as any to take a stand against the tide because first, successful schooling is crucial to the prospects of individual students and to our collective future. Second, education is high on the public's list of concerns and therefore an inherently compelling topic. And third, schools are tangible institutions in the midst of communities that citizens can see and get their hands on and therefore do something about in relatively direct ways. For all of these reasons, if the public cannot be successfully engaged in fixing whatever is broken in our nation's schools, it is hard to imagine any issue in which they can be engaged.

But how can the public best be engaged? The rest of this paper is devoted to that question.

¹⁴ The parent involvement quote is from A.T. Henderson and N. Berla, eds. *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*, 1994. The community involvement quote is from J. Braatz and R. Putnam, *Community-Based Social Capital and Educational Performance: Exploring New Evidence*, prepublication draft, 1998. Additionally, the work of the Alliance Schools network in Texas has shown strong case study evidence of a correlation between community engagement and higher test scores – see Dennis Shirley, *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform*, University of Texas, 1997.



II. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE PUBLIC-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP

Typical, Top-Down Approaches to the Public

In developing strategies to repair and revitalize the relationship between a community and its schools, practitioners of public engagement posit they are offering something new and needed, beyond the status quo. What, then, are the typical forms of the public-school relationship, and how do they compare with public engagement?

When it comes to making policy, attempting reform or taking action on education in some other way, administrators and other education leaders usually take one of two top-down approaches to the public. One is *avoiding the public* as much as possible by insulating decision making within bureaucratic and political processes. The other is *selling the public* on a preordained decision through public relations and marketing techniques. Some school leaders have also added *one-way communications* strategies to their repertoire, such as opinion research and the dissemination of information, which can amount to good first steps toward true public engagement, but by themselves fall short.

Avoiding the Public

The first approach to the public employed by those who make school policy is often to avoid, or at least minimize, public involvement to the extent possible. From this perspective, policy is best made by experts and the public's elected representatives. Citizens themselves, in this view, have little to offer and are more likely to confuse the policy process than aid it.

This is the traditional approach of school administrators, school board members and academic experts, who, by virtue of their positions, tend to view themselves as the most qualified to make policy, and who seek therefore to minimize public involvement in policymaking and reform.

Selling the Public

But often the public cannot be kept at bay. Perhaps new tax revenues are needed, or groups of citizens have asserted themselves into the policy process at school board meetings, as they did at the listening sessions of the Nebraska board described earlier. School policy makers typically confront this reality by resorting to some form of managing the public using the tools of public relations and marketing.

This approach typically comes up with a solution first and then attempts to sell it to the public. It may involve a kind of listening to "consumers," but only to devise the most effective means of persuading them to buy into a preconceived idea. Rather than entering into a dialogue of honest give and take, and a process by which citizens can understand the pros and the cons of different policies, public relations manages and markets ideas to the public. Such partisan approaches are often employed by school administrators, politicians, experts and others at the power center of school policy making. And it can be employed by interest groups such as business, teachers unions, PTAs and grassroots organizations seeking to influence policy from outside the system. In either case, it entails an approach that views the public as a



means to a preconceived end. By treating people as consumers to be manipulated, rather than as citizens to be engaged, it also increases the already endemic mistrust and cynicism of citizens toward professionals, elected officials and the overall policy process.

One-Way Communications

Beyond avoiding or selling the public are one-way communications strategies either to get information out to community members or get information back from them. Specifically, public opinion research allows leaders to learn about people's views, and various dissemination strategies allows them to get information out.

These strategies can be either partisan or nonpartisan in their efforts to tap into the public's views and give people an opportunity to learn more about school issues. That is, they can serve a specific agenda (e.g., research to devise the best way to persuade community members to vote yes on the next bond issue) or they can be nonpartisan attempts to understand and inform the public's agenda. In their nonpartisan forms they can be useful first steps toward public engagement.

If done well, opinion research can inform policy makers of the public's priorities and concerns, and thus – after a fashion – include the public in policy developments. Although it is a potentially powerful *aid* to public engagement, opinion research is not a substitute for it. It provides a reading of people's state of mind, but does not, by itself, help them develop their thinking. It can illuminate confusion but does not constitute the communication needed to correct it. It can distinguish those issues people are willing to

delegate to professionals from those they want to have a say in, but does not necessarily give them much of a say. It can clarify differences in priority among various stakeholders, but does not help communities work through those differences to build the common ground and collaborations that serve students and improve schools.

As for getting information out to citizens, things such as school report cards, accessible budget data and the like can be a useful first step in helping the public engage school issues.¹⁵ Such informational approaches provide data and context for people's deliberations and actions. But like public opinion research, information without opportunities for reflection, dialogue and collective action offers only a limited form of public engagement. Indeed, it can sometimes unwittingly inhibit it by overwhelming citizens with technical data when their primary concerns are with values questions or broad issues of mission, and not with the minutia of the policy debate. Information without community dialogue does not open up lines of communication or create opportunities for citizens to build partnerships that can lead to new, coordinated actions on behalf of schools and students.

Even in their nonpartisan forms, then, one-way communications are limited mechanisms that fall short of true public engagement as conceived here: strategies that involve all sectors of a community in ongoing deliberation with educators to build, over time, the common ground and collaboration needed to

¹⁵Good examples are: *Reporting Results: What the Public Wants to Know*, A-Plus Communications, 1999; and *The Power of Information: A Report to the Public*, EdSource, 1996.

sustain serious efforts at reform. But they can, and often do, provide steps in the right direction.

Opting Out or Crashing In: The Public's Role in Business as Usual, and the Vicious Cycle of Bad Communication

If avoiding, selling and, occasionally, researching and informing are the modes by which leaders typically relate to the public, how do most citizens relate to the schools and education issues? Most either opt out or crash in. The dismally low voter turnout for school board elections and the falling rate of PTA membership are indications that most citizens, most of the time, have little involvement in school affairs. But when citizens do break through their complacency and the bureaucratic barriers that stand in their way, they often do so in an overly aggressive and narrow way.

This, it turns out, is exactly what educators complain about when they reflect on their experiences with the public: angry parents demanding special consideration for their child, single interest groups demanding privileges, public meetings degenerating into useless gripe sessions. As one superintendent put it, "You talk about public engagement, but in my experience it's usually a matter of public *enragement*." The result is a vicious circle in which the actions – and inactions – of citizens and the school system reinforce each other's worst habits, and the breach widens.

In sum, a lack of imagination has limited the public-school relationship to its least productive possibilities, which is exactly why new ideas and new efforts are needed.

Public Engagement in Education

How does public engagement compare with business as usual? Perhaps most crucially it presupposes a more collaborative relationship between educators and community members than is typically the case. The usual top-down, one-way communications are replaced by a mutual struggle for solutions that most can live with and contribute to, and a sense of shared responsibility for results. Public engagement assumes community members can and should be involved, not in every technical detail of school policy, but in helping to set the broad directions and values from which policy proceeds. It assumes, moreover, that the community can play important, even vital, roles in making school policies work.

To say that citizens should be more engaged in the life of their local schools is not to argue that all members of the community should have an equal say in every aspect of school policy, and that traditional school leadership and professional expertise no longer count. While public engagement activities might sometimes lead to power-sharing mechanisms, such as referendums or site-based management, they need not be equated with such formal structures of political participation.

Indeed, referendums – while certainly a means to involve voters in a policy debate – can create conditions antithetical to the reflection, compromise and collaboration among citizens that is at the heart of public engagement. They allow for only an up or down statement on an issue, and even when they are nonpartisan in intent they elicit highly partisan forms of persuasion that work against the ability of citizens to deliberate effectively. Referendums can also represent a strategic partisan gambit to run around a

policy debate – vote while emotions are hot one way or the other. Referendums, however, that *follow* a larger program of public engagement can make more sense, for then citizens have had ample opportunities to deliberate and develop their views. A vote at that point can be a culminating event in a round of public engagement activity rather than a substitute for it.

Some version of site-based management, where community volunteers sit on school councils to help set policy, can also be part of a public engagement initiative. But it is possible for the public to be engaged in its local schools in crucial ways without necessarily taking part in formal governance structures, which in any event will never include more than a small number of community members.¹⁶

Public engagement, then, may be conceived as attempts to involve all sectors of a community in ongoing deliberation on education issues, and to build common ground and collaboration that will benefit schools and students. This conceptualization has been embodied in an approach called *Public Conversations About the Public's Schools* and applied in scores of communities over the last few years. The following sections describe this method and the experiences and lessons it has led to in the field.

¹⁶Recent research of public school parents by Public Agenda suggests that most public schools parents do not see *direct and detailed* policy making as their most appropriate or important role. See Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson and Anne Duffett, *Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk About Parental Involvement in Public Schools*, Public Agenda, 1999.

III. PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE PUBLIC'S SCHOOLS AN APPROACH TO PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Much of Public Agenda's work on public engagement in education has occurred in partnership with the Institute of Educational Leadership beginning in 1995. The project, which came to be known as *Public Conversations About the Public's Schools*, was tested and refined through a national demonstration in 10 sites in 1996 and 1997. Subsequently the model has been applied (and the refinement process has continued) in scores of sites around the nation. This section describes this approach to community engagement; the next offers a series of case studies; and following those is a discussion of major lessons learned to date.²⁶

The Research Foundation

Much of the impetus for community conversation work came from research on the attitudes, priorities and perceptions that the public and educators hold toward schools and school reform. Beginning with the 1994 Public Agenda report *First Things First: What Americans Expect From The Public Schools*, important elements of the public's agenda began to clarify. Most of all, people said they want safe public schools with calm, orderly environments, in which students are, at the very least, mastering the

academic basics as a foundation for higher order learning. This fundamental first things first agenda cut across the general public as well as the subgroups highlighted in that study: white, African American and "traditional Christian" public school parents.

As simple as those findings may sound today, *First Things First* was greeted with a pronounced "Aha!" from the education reform community, which began to see why its language and messages were not communicating well. For these are priorities so at the forefront of people's minds that ignoring them makes reformers seem fundamentally out of touch, and their own ideas will be rejected as a consequence. Put simply, if you want to talk about "higher order critical thinking skills" you may well have to talk about school safety and the basics first. And you're certainly going to have to talk in a language that people can relate to and understand. Subsequent research clarified in greater detail the ways in which the public's language and priorities often diverged from those of educators and experts.

All of this led Public Agenda and IEL (whose work in the field with school boards and superintendents reinforced the opinion research) to the conclusion that dialogue was sorely needed. It was equally obvious that, as noted earlier, in the natural course of affairs – at board, PTA or city council meetings – the conditions for good dialogue were lacking, so we set out to develop strategies and materials to help

²⁶The strategy was first reported in articles by Jacqueline Danzberger and Will Friedman, "Public Conversations About the Public's Schools: The Public Agenda/Institute for Educational Leadership Town Meeting Project;" Sue Van Slyke, "Building Community for Public Schools: Challenges and Strategies;" Deborah Wadsworth, "Building a Strategy for Successful Public Engagement," all in *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 1997; and Donna Muncey, Jennifer Obidah and Noel White, *Final Documentation and Evaluation Report for Public Conversations about the Public's Schools*, October 1997.



communities have better conversations about their schools.

Framing Issues and Developing Discussion Materials

Our research had revealed a set of issues within education that were clearly in need of attention, areas of concern to both the public and educators and where common ground was lacking. From those issues, we chose to begin with six that we would frame into a set of choices for citizen deliberation:

- Academic Standards and Expectations
- Teaching Methods
- School Funding
- Parental Involvement
- Purposes of Education
- School Choice

Since then, we have also designed frameworks for:

- School Safety (developed in collaboration with the NEA public engagement project)
- Integration and Educational Equity (developed as part of the Connecticut Community Conversation Project)
- Helping All Children Succeed in School in a Diverse Society (developed as part of a project on race and education in collaboration with the Public Education Network)

In all cases, the discussion frameworks were developed out of focus group research and reflect the language and concerns found in conversations among ordinary citizens. At the same time, we tried to capture basic tensions within the professional policy debate.

These frameworks have been translated into videos, each about seven minutes long, that present several basic approaches to addressing the education issue under consideration. (For an example of the text of a choice framework, see Appendix 2.)

Generally, the videos are used to spur dialogue during the first hour or so of small group discussion. They have proven themselves to be extremely useful discussion starters, helping people articulate their basic values about an aspect of education and their analyses of what works and what doesn't, and participants rate them highly in post-meeting surveys. In addition to this choice component of the discussion, there is almost always a second phase of group work that looks more concretely at how the conversation applies to the local schools, and then moves toward solutions. The topic for this part of the discussion is chosen by the planning committee to ground the discussion in live local issues. Public Agenda/IEL help translate these issues into a form that participants can handle effectively in the context of a community forum.

For example, many of our community conversations on academic standards proceed, after the more general and philosophical discussion engendered by the video, to two more concrete questions. First, "How are standards being handled locally?" And then, "How can schools, families and the wider community do a better job of working together to help students succeed?"

The latter part of the small groups' dialogues can also be devoted to examining specific, pending policy proposals related to the topic. This was the case in

Nebraska, described earlier, where participants reacted to draft standards the state board was considering.

Creating a Process

The kind of dialogues we thought were needed included a broad cross-section of a community, including "regular folks" who may not represent a formal stakeholder group and who would not typically attend public forums. The trick was to create a process in which citizens with little experience expressing themselves publicly on matters of policy could hold their own with more polished professionals and community leaders. Based on our focus group experimentation, we knew the discussion materials we had prepared could help policy neophytes engage the issues and begin to find their own voices. We were also convinced that dialogue among such diverse participants would only succeed in small, well-moderated groups, and so we developed organizing procedures, moderating techniques and forum structures that would allow for this.

Organizing Forums

Although the catalyst for a community conversation initiative may be a single local entity, such as a school district, a local education fund, a parent group, or some other community-based organization, the forums are typically organized and hosted by a local coalition. Public Agenda and IEL offer technical support (consulting, planning guides, discussion materials, moderator training, etc.) either on a fee-for-service basis or through a grant-supported project for which the community has applied to participate.

The organizational structure of local projects typically has two levels, sponsorship and planning. Sponsors are local entities who have publicly agreed to host the event. The planning group generally consists of representatives from the sponsoring organizations, along with other community leaders who have agreed to roll up their sleeves and go to work on the initiative. They make decisions on the forum topic, location, moderators, how to handle the media, and so on.

Moderating and Recording Forums

Forums are typically moderated by trained local volunteers. Their main goals are to:

- create an environment where people can express ideas safely.
- encourage participation, and not allow individuals or subgroups to dominate the discussion.
- help people examine their own views, understand the views of others, and communicate effectively about education issues with diverse members of the community.
- clarify and move forward, the local "state of the debate" on the issue at hand.

The aim is not to achieve consensus, which would be premature in most cases, but to facilitate a positive and stimulating conversation among equals that allows views to be articulated and examined. In this way we hope the dialogue will clarify areas of common ground, important disagreements that will require continued dialogue, questions and concerns that deserve further attention, and ways in which the community can continue to talk and act together on behalf of students and schools

The recording function at community conversations is also of paramount importance, for it must capture live conversation with sufficient clarity and in sufficient detail that organizers can use the notes for planning follow-up. Like moderators, recorders are typically local volunteers.

meeting questionnaire that gives them a final opportunity to comment on the evening's topic and suggest next steps.

9:30 p.m. **End**

Structuring Forums

A standard forum might draw about 100 participants, including public schools parents, students and educators, private school parents, local employers, senior citizens, college educators, religious leaders, social workers, residents without children in school, and others, who have been invited by a planning committee. Forums are always about a specific education topic and billed as an opportunity to join together with a cross-section of the community to build mutual understanding and work toward solutions. A typical agenda might look like this:

Following Up on Forums

The planning committee – sometimes replenished by forum participants – creates a summary of a forum's discussion notes and post-meeting survey responses and mails it to participants along with suggestions and plans for follow-up. Results from these forums have ranged from the creation of new community organizations and school staff positions to school policy changes and a marked improvement in atmosphere surrounding school-community relations.

The following case studies will further flesh out this description of the *Public Conversations About the Public Schools* approach, which, as of this writing, has been applied in more than 50 communities across the nation.

- 5:30 p.m. **Registration and Dinner**
- 6:30 p.m. **Opening plenary**, in which participants are welcomed by a representative of the planning committee and the evening's purpose and game plan are described.
- 7:00 p.m. **Small group discussions**, the heart of the process.
- 9:00 p.m. **Closing plenary**, in which brief highlights from the summaries of each group are shared and ideas for follow-up are described. Participants are asked to complete a **post-**

IV. CASE STUDIES

Helping to Change the Context of School Funding in Gray and New Gloucester, Maine

For many years, especially the first half of the 1990s, the annual school budget vote in the Maine towns of Gray and New Gloucester produced a rancor that belied the tranquility of the setting. The historic towns – one of which is home to an active Shaker community and retains some of its rural heritage with house decorating contests and a fall apple festival – share a school district of 2,100 students. Many of the residents in these basically blue-collar communities are either elderly or trades people whose families trace their roots in Maine for several generations.

The discord began with a group called the Taxpayers Association of Gray, which took a hard-line attitude toward any tax increases and created an advertising campaign that attracted many new members, turning the group into a formidable thorn for the school board. First the group succeeded in placing the school budget on a separate ballot, after which residents routinely voted down the proposed finance plans, often taking three or more votes each year, before finally approving one. One year it took five votes – including an unprecedented tie – before a budget passed. Another year the residents voted down receiving even a state subsidy for schools.

Such was the situation, including a deficit of about \$200,000 left by her predecessor, that Judy Lucarelli inherited in fall 1995 when she took over as district

superintendent. One of her declared priorities was to “restore some civility” to the dialogue between school officials and the townspeople. A colleague mentioned the pilot *Public Conversations* project being offered by Public Agenda and IEL, and Lucarelli applied to participate.

But once accepted into the project, Lucarelli essentially gave the reins to a planning group composed of community members, led by Donnie Carroll, a former state legislator held in high regard by the community. Explaining her willingness to turn over control, the superintendent said, “I wanted to deal with the underlying cause, which was a lack of trust and communication; the symptom was the budget not being passed.” She felt that trust could best be restored by a citizen-led initiative instead of one in which the district took the lead. As this case shows, and subsequent cases as well, the role the district plays in public engagement initiatives is often a significant factor for both near and long-term success. School officials and community members often jostle for control, and the way in which this dynamic is handled can have a lasting impact. In this case, the district took a position behind the scenes, but a supportive one.

Carroll enlisted the help of three other residents to serve on the planning committee for an initial forum, dubbed “Seeking Public Agreement for Next Steps,” or “SPANS,” the name by which the organizing group came to be known. One of its members later noted

that although the superintendent provided staff support, “naming ourselves gave us our own identity.”

The superintendent, on behalf of SPANS, sent letters to “every organization we could think of, from the American Legion to gospel churches,” asking them to submit four names of potential forum participants, writing, “as you know, our district has been embroiled in bitter disputes over the last several years. ... We hope SPANS will serve as a catalyst toward better communication and foster healthy dialogue.”

It was certainly needed. As one example of the low regard townspeople had for the district – and in confirmation of the superintendent’s decision to turn the project over to citizen volunteers – several people warned SPANS against using school letterhead on invitations to the meeting because people would be wary and not attend. But the group chose to use the superintendent’s office as the return address anyway.

For its initial forum SPANS chose two topics from the menu of video discussion starters, “Purposes of Education” and “Academic Standards and Expectations.” These seemed like fundamental questions that needed answering before addressing other issues, such as school funding or parental involvement.²⁷ The fact that anyone attended the first forum, held Oct. 22, 1996, was itself a minor miracle. SPANS was astounded that 72 people showed, despite heavy rain storms that left Maine in a state of

emergency from flooding and sections of the Maine Turnpike washed away.

The meeting was held at the Gray-New Gloucester High School and began with dinner and welcoming remarks from Donnie Carroll of SPANS. Participants then split into three groups, although organizers probably should have created a fourth for more manageable sizes, as two groups had 20 participants and the third had 32.

Each group spent about an hour on each of the two topics--academic standards first, followed by purposes of education. Members of SPANS served as moderators of the small groups because they had attended the training for the national *Public Conversations* project and had the right amount of “distance and perspective” the organizers deemed necessary to moderate such a conversation.

The forum left SPANS confident that a tone of civil dialogue had been set. In the view of one SPANS member, participants had “taken a giant leap by sitting in a room and saying hello without screaming.” And they hoped future conversations could lead to the all-important one that had animated the project from the start – school financing. There was also the hope that discussions about other important school issues might indirectly affect people’s attitudes about how to approach the budget process. Indeed, survey results bore out this feeling. The majority of participants (85%) cited both topics as equally important but said there should have been more students in attendance. Still, 82% felt a fair cross-section of the community had been represented. (It should be noted that although racial diversity is virtually nonexistent in the

²⁷This forum was part of the *Public Conversations* national demonstration and thus among the first to employ these methods and materials. To test all the discussion modules we had created, many sites ended up tackling two or three topics. Since then we always recommend that only one topic be used in a single forum.



towns of Gray and New Gloucester, there is a range of economic levels, from lower-middle class craftspeople and senior citizens on fixed incomes to wealthier business professionals.) When asked what they liked best, many participants noted the “openness and honesty” and the “non-threatening, civil, respectful dialogue.”

During this first round of forums, Public Agenda and IEL gave only secondary attention to issues of follow-through and action. Our purpose at that point was to demonstrate that civil and engaging dialogue could be achieved among a cross-section of community members – including those who would not typically attend public forums – and learn what we could about it. Focusing on action would be our next concern once we determined that we were on track. We were therefore pleased that the initial Maine forum energized several town residents to join the steering committee after participating in the initial forum and who later initiated a series of follow-up activities.

Over the next two years, SPANS organized three more forums. While the topics appeared to be somewhat less focused – student aspirations, for example – and they were not as well attended as the first, they did serve to engage more people in experiences of civil, democratic dialogue and to elicit some community action. For example, an offshoot of SPANS, calling itself “The Behavior Group,” conducted a series of interviews at all grade levels with students, faculty and parents about interpersonal behavior, organized the data and presented the findings to the school board. On the topic of respect, for example, the group recommended that staff treat high school students as young adults and not children;

since the report, students have been asked to be more involved in making decisions.

At the same time that SPANS was doing its work, other constructive factors were coming into play. For example, the local newspaper began a campaign of strong editorials denouncing the votes against the school budget. And each school principal started sending home regular newsletters, and the district compiled report cards for each school. The result of these collective efforts were victories on several fronts:

- *an improved school funding process and atmosphere.* The district created a budget advisory committee comprised of three residents from each town to review the proposed finance plan and make recommendations. This new consensus-building mechanism has helped move the discussions in the right direction, leading to more civil debates and a school budget that has since passed on the first ballot.

It should be noted, however, that although the budget passing on the first vote is a marked improvement from years past, the votes have often been close. This spring, for example, it failed in Gray but still passed overall because New Gloucester has more residents who approved it. Still, everyone with whom we spoke feels that the issue of school funding has improved dramatically, with the SPANS forums as one contributing factor.

- *a rise in volunteerism and community involvement.* Since the initial forum, two SPANS

members have been elected to the school board. One of them explained he chose to run for office because his work on SPANS helped expose him to the system and its shortcomings. The district, for reasons unknown, has a history of relying on volunteers to fulfill duties other school districts routinely handle, such as maintaining playing fields. Since the SPANS forums began, a parent-teacher-student association has been created, and fine arts boosters are working at unprecedented levels to raise money and create programs.

- *a change in attitude toward the school system.* By 1996, some parents (about 12%) had pulled their children out of district schools, and chose home schooling or sending their children to private school instead. But about the time SPANS began, many of those students started returning to the public schools, the former superintendent said, in part because the SPANS work helped parents realize there were many positive aspects of the schools that had been overshadowed by the ugliness of the budget fights.
- *attempts at better communication between the towns and school district.* The towns themselves had a history of rancor, with town councils often making decisions against the clear will of the residents. So the school board and town councils of Gray and New Gloucester, 24 people, began to meet biannually. Also, the town managers, superintendent and school board chair people began to meet every few weeks, in a group dubbed the “joint chiefs.”

Although SPANS has its share of accomplishments in a short period, as an exemplar of public engagement it also displays some limitations. The group never sent press releases to the newspaper to get coverage of its forums, and beyond an initial article announcing the formation of the group it received little press and was probably not influential beyond the immediate school community.

Eventually, as the issue that had animated it in the first place (the school budget) became less acute, SPANS faded, and there is still some lingering disappointment that it did. Although the group definitely helped bring together parents and other school community members in the short term, and although two SPANS members now sit on the school board, it does not seem to have fundamentally changed the culture of communication around Gray/New Gloucester schools. For example, Judy Lucarelli left her superintendent post at the end of the 1999 school year to become an associate commissioner of education for the state. But in the search for her replacement, the school board did not ask for public input, resorting instead to business as usual. On the other hand, we know of no discontent with the choice, so it is possible that the school board has become more sensitized to public concerns and preferences.

Perhaps it is fair to say that if the goal of SPANS and the reasons for its creation was to improve the budget process, then it was a success, and faded from sight because it was no longer needed. If the goal was to achieve something larger, to change the culture of communication among school officials and the public, then it appears to have fallen short of its potential. It is

also possible that the experience of community conversation and public engagement gained during the life of SPANS can be retrieved if a new crisis, on the level of the school budget battles, appears. In any event, subsequent cases will show how public engagement can sometimes take root more deeply and become a more institutionalized aspect of school and community life.

Coming to Terms with Standards Reform in Bridgeport, Connecticut

With 21,000 students, the Bridgeport school system is the second largest in Connecticut. It is also a diverse community, with a quarter of the population African American, another quarter Hispanic, a small number of Asians and the rest white. About 70% of the public school students receive free or reduced lunches, and more than 30% of students come from homes where English is not the primary language. These are issues faced by many urban and, increasingly, quite a few suburban school districts across the nation.

Public engagement is not a new concept for the Bridgeport schools, where for many years school improvement projects have attempted to involve parents and other community members. The Bridgeport Public Education Fund, headed by Marge Hiller, has often been at the core of such work through community grants for teachers' special classroom or interactive learning projects, for example. In 1997, a statewide public engagement project called Connecticut Community Conversations on Education provided the opportunity to broaden the scope of such work.

Connecticut Community Conversations – a joint effort of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund (a foundation dedicated to improving the prospects of Connecticut's children), the Connecticut League of Women Voters, Public Agenda and the Institute for Educational Leadership – is an outgrowth of research on public attitudes toward schools and school reform in the state. That research, commissioned by Graustein and conducted by Public Agenda, resulted

in the report *The Broken Contract*,²⁸ which showed significant gaps between the general public, community leaders and educators concerning the problems facing Connecticut's schools and the most promising solutions. The report placed in stark relief the need for common ground to provide a basis for school reform and, therefore, some process of public communications to achieve it. As a result, Graustein asked Public Agenda and IEL to help design and implement a statewide public engagement initiative in collaboration with the state's League of Women Voters.

The project began with eight local sponsors, chosen through an application process, in sites covering 17 towns to work as a network to build statewide capacity for new kinds of civic dialogues on the range of issues facing Connecticut's schools. Each site would receive a modest stipend to offset organizing expenses (\$2,000 for single community sites and \$2,500 for regional sites). And they received technical assistance from Public Agenda and IEL (organizational consulting, moderator training, discussion-starter videos, etc.) as well as support from the League of Women Voters, Graustein, and all the organizations in the other sites involved in the project.

Each site began its work with a community conversation on an education topic selected from the *Public Conversations* menu of prepared materials and then followed up according to their initial results. Two sites chose to begin their initiatives focusing on parental involvement; one selected purposes of education, and the rest, academic standards, which,

²⁸Public Agenda, 1994.

as in much of the rest of the nation, had become a hot topic across Connecticut.

In Bridgeport, Hiller decided to apply for the project as a complement to and extension of the partnerships already begun with community-based groups such as the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition and RYASAP, a substance abuse center. She created a consortium of those organizations, plus two parent groups, and applied to participate.

Because the five partner groups knew each other from past projects, the initial planning process proceeded smoothly. They formed a planning team of 18 members, from names submitted by each organization, including the assistant superintendent, which met every three weeks for about four months. They chose to focus their initial public dialogue on academic standards because, even though the school district had put standards into place two years earlier with little controversy, they believed it was an issue few parents or other community members understood well.²⁹

More than 300 people – representing a broad cross-section of the community by ethnicity as well as by affiliation, including parents, teachers, students, clergy and business people – were invited to the conversation, which was a first for Bridgeport and for the overall Connecticut project. Fernando Muniz, who was trained as a moderator and who helped recruit participants, said the planning involved much more

²⁹ They were undoubtedly correct. We have been involved with more community forums across the country on standards than any other topic, and the amount of confusion among *educators*, let alone the general public, about standards is mind boggling.

work than he had originally thought when volunteering to help with the project, but that the amount of effort was reflected in the quality of the community conversation.

About 50 participants, along with many invited observers, attended the Bridgeport session, held on May 9, 1998.³⁰ As with all of the Connecticut forums, the meeting began with a meal. Participants were then welcomed by some of the organizers and supporters before breaking off into four small discussion groups, each of which began with a video discussion starter describing two hypothetical superintendent candidates and their different approaches to standards. People in each group then considered the question, “How can schools, families, and the wider community do a better job of working together to help students achieve higher standards?” The small group discussion wrapped up with a brainstorming session on how to follow up on the conversation.

In post-forum surveys, when asked what people liked most, 63% responded with a variation on two themes: the diversity of participants and opinions, and the open, respectful tone of the meeting. Asked how best to follow up on the event, 90% wanted to continue the dialogue about how to raise expectations for Bridgeport's students and include new people in that dialogue. Almost everyone said the moderators and the format involving choices between different approaches to the issue were “very helpful.” And the

³⁰ Given the amount of work invested by organizers in recruiting participants, this was a smaller turnout than expected. The reasons for this are not clear and it could simply have been a fluke – an unknown scheduling conflict, perhaps. Be that as it may, participants and organizers alike were well satisfied with the quality of the conversation and, as we shall see, the organizers successfully built on this original forum and continued to engage the community.

discussions were evidently honest ones, with the majority saying “never” when asked how often they held back to avoid offending others. Although the evening session lasted well over four hours – the small group discussions were themselves two hours in length – perhaps the most common complaint was that there was “not enough time” to do the topic justice.

From the organizer's perspective, despite the hard work put into inviting people, making follow-up calls, etc, they still felt the biggest challenge was ensuring a diverse mix of participants. In an effort to include the growing Hispanic population of Bridgeport, the planning team made special outreach efforts and translated the Participant Guide into Spanish. Nevertheless, the lack of participation from the Hispanic community confounded organizers, who are still stumped by the problem. “We’ve tried everything we can think of, from going door-to-door to Spanish radio ads,” said Alma Maya of Aspira, a national nonprofit serving Latino youth and families, and one of the partner groups. “They say they’re coming but then they don’t. I think it’s about a lack of trust and that they don’t feel invested in this community because they have one foot here and one foot in Puerto Rico. They’ll go there to vote but they won’t vote here. We say we want a true reflection of the community, but it’s so hard...”³¹

That significant disappointment notwithstanding, there were several immediate positive outcomes from the

May 9 forum. For one, several young people, described by the substance abuse counselor who invited them to participate as “middle of the road who had never before been involved in much,” have since become active in the community drug program after “feeling listened to for the first time.” Some organizers and participants also noted a shift in attitude at the top echelons of the school district, administrators, for example, “are more on their toes” when citizens address the school board.

A month after the town meeting, the partner groups reconvened to figure out long-term follow-up strategies. They decided that any next steps would be most effective if they were school-based and grounded in the further deliberations of community members around those schools. This can also be viewed as a response to participant suggestions for more dialogue and more people involved in any follow-up activities. The group therefore enlisted the help of the superintendent to devise a neighborhood strategy to complement the original district-wide community conversation.

The superintendent had long known the sponsoring organizations from other projects, believed in what they were doing, and gave his blessing and support. He helped select 10 schools, whose principals were introduced to the concept of public engagement and asked to participate in the second phase of Bridgeport’s public engagement initiative. With \$5,000 in funding from the Public Education Network, the organizers were able to give \$400 to each school liaison, either a principal, PTA member or staff person, to help plan for a conversation on standards in each of the school communities. Members of the

³¹Some forums in other communities have had similar challenges involving Hispanic participation, while others have had considerable success, notably in East New York in Brooklyn and Culver City, California.

planning group for the initial community conversation acted as “mentors” to the school planning groups.

Nine of the schools held their forums in the spring of 1999, with an average of 50 people – including parents, teachers, students and business people – participating in each session, using the same format as the earlier district-wide forum. After one session held at the K-8 Curiale School, one participant noted she was “very energized about this process.” And the principal there said afterward that seeing the concept in action got him thinking about the importance of grassroots community involvement in the school. “At first I thought it was just another job for me to do, but now I would definitely do it again. Where it will lead, I don’t know though,” the principal said.

The final school-based forum in the series took place in the fall. The partners met to discuss the results of the citizen deliberations with the superintendent and his top officials. Among the issues were:

- parent concerns about too many students being suspended and their desire for an in-school solution. The district in response cited its shared concerns, but explained that students suspended for things like weapons and assault incidents had to be removed, and a school-based solution was not an option. The organizers accepted this response and it remains to be seen if new ideas for addressing the problem develop.
- making parents more aware of what schools expect from students. The district had been working on such a handbook and upon hearing of the ideas generated at the forums on this topic, asked the organizers to help refine the

expectations. As a result of their input, revisions are underway, and handbooks are expected to be distributed to parents with the first report card of the year.

The partner organizations believe the district has responded so positively because it too is struggling with issues such as lack of parental involvement and troubled students and wants any help it can get. The district’s role has evolved from a peripheral player to a central partner, and planners feel its support is paramount to any follow-up successes.

One issue Bridgeport faced when planning the public engagement initiative is something all urban districts attempting this must face – sheer size. Planning a program to involve regular citizens in serious discussions about school improvement when the district might span miles of neighborhoods and many thousands of students means selecting, at least to start with, some neighborhoods and leaving others aside. In Bridgeport’s case, organizers focused on a handful of schools, even though they would have liked to involve everyone.

One of the hardest elements for organizers to handle had been convincing the school principals that the second phase of the public engagement strategy – holding conversations in 10 schools – was not a threat to them and was not, as many felt, one more burdensome item added to their schedules. The district superintendent essentially told the principals to cooperate, and eventually most did. The process was helped as some of the principals – who worried about the extra work or about the conversations turning into a complaint session about schools – attended the first

of the 10 conversations, which alleviated some of those concerns.

An alternative strategy would have been to create an invitation for perhaps half a dozen principals to join the community conversation project, with a second phase to follow. Then principals who were more sold on the idea to begin with could have gotten started, while those who were less sure could attend as observers and, hopefully, come on board in the next phase. In this way the statewide strategy that led to Bridgeport's involvement in the Connecticut Community Conversation project could have been replicated on a local scale.

Be that as it may, a sign of the district's buy-in to the necessity for public engagement was its decision to request \$50,000 from a new federal initiative (called Safe Schools, Healthy Schools) to be used for more community conversations next year on school violence. The money – a sliver of a multimillion grant application the district has pending – would be given to the original community conversation partner groups for staff, resources and training for further community-school dialogues.

The partners have also applied to two local foundations to fund a second round of discussions at 14 individual schools beginning in January. Having learned from the difficulties of schools being assigned by the superintendent to participate, organizers are instead planning an application process so that only the most interested principals or parent groups will be involved. In anticipation of receiving the funding, the Bridgeport consortium is hoping to train 10 additional

local people as moderators to build local capacity for future dialogues.

In sum, several factors seemed to contribute in Bridgeport's success:

- the solid reputation of both the statewide partners and the local education fund, permitting the fund to act effectively as a catalyst to spark the interest of other community-based organizations as well as the school district.
- the diversity of the community-based planning group, which created a nonpartisan umbrella for the forum and which fed into the membership of the planning committee, creating the networking capacity needed to recruit moderators and participants.
- the amount of effort and energy directed to including a cross-section of the community.
- the commitment to serious follow-through in the aftermath of the original, districtwide forum to expand and embed community conversations in the life of the district, neighborhood by neighborhood.
- securing the active support of district leadership.

A coda to this phase of the story: Bridgeport's successful venture into this form of public engagement work has led the statewide partners in the Connecticut Community Conversation project to ask them to mentor the neighboring community of

Norwalk as it embarks on its first public engagement initiative in the next phase of the statewide project.

Institutionalizing Public Engagement in San Jose, California

The public engagement experience in California's San Jose Unified School District began with the superintendent, Linda Murray, a member of The Danforth Foundation's Forum for the American Superintendent's public engagement initiative and a "graduate" of IEL's Superintendents Prepared Program. The Danforth initiative consists of eight superintendents from across the country who have embarked on a five-year effort to engage their communities in new ways in school improvement. (In addition to San Jose, the participating districts are Tulsa, Oklahoma; Rochester, New York; Crossette, Arkansas; Cobb County, Georgia; Arlington, Texas; Nye County, Nevada; and Anderson County, Tennessee.)

The superintendents in each of these districts have received professional training in various facets of public engagement, from conducting focus groups to working with the media to conducting community conversations. For example, they were all guest observers at a community conversation on academic standards and expectations in East New York supported by Public Agenda and IEL. The Danforth superintendents have also been eligible for mini-grants to enable them to build capacity for local engagement efforts, and it was through this program that San Jose's efforts began.

The concept of public engagement (beyond traditional school communications) was new in San Jose, and the district began by working simultaneously with Public Agenda to conduct qualitative research on the

opinions of San Jose residents and with A-Plus Communications on a communications audit to inform the district's strategic plan.

On the public opinion front, Public Agenda conducted several focus groups – one each with Anglo parents, bilingual Hispanic parents, Spanish-only Hispanic parents, students of various backgrounds, and teachers. Also, two groups were comprised of a mixture of parents, students, teachers, recent graduates and retirees. These heterogeneous focus groups roughly reflect the makeup of a community conversation breakout group, and are an excellent means for testing themes (to help organizers choose fruitful topics for public engagement) and helping clarify how local issues and dynamics show up in public discussions, which can then be worked into moderator guides and training sessions prior to a forum.³² The topics in the focus groups were student achievement, diversity and equity in the school district, as well as a series of questions relevant to public engagement. One district official called the findings of those groups, held in fall 1997, "an eye-opening experience" because of the different values that residents from different backgrounds and neighborhoods placed on student diversity. Another big surprise to district officials was hearing students say they could "just get by" because teachers had low expectations of them. Parents too wanted more accountability from teachers, more than "smiley faces on homework papers." Higher expectations of students, they believed, would lead to higher academic achievement. Partly in response to the

³² Will Friedman, "Student Achievement, Diversity and Equity in the San Jose Unified School District: A Public Engagement Focus Group Study with Parents, Students and Teachers," Public Agenda, 1997.

focus groups, the school board raised the graduation requirements to add another year of science, math and foreign language. This policy affected the freshmen class entering in 1998.

Subsequently, the district began planning a community forum, with local moderators and a topic – standards and expectations – that the district had begun exploring in the focus groups. While the forum was initiated and sponsored by the school district, officials followed the *Public Conversations* recommendation of creating a broad-based committee, rather than limiting planning to its staff.

The planning group, called a “leadership team” by the district, initially consisted of 30 parents, clergy and others but later dropped to about a dozen – which happens to be the number that Public Agenda and IEL generally recommend to sites that are forming planning teams. One parent, who worked on the team and later as a moderator, said the planning process was the first time many of the members had worked together with each other and with the school district.

According to one parent member of the planning team, one problem with having this process organized and sponsored by the district was that contentious issues between school officials and community members seemed, in the early going, to be resolved in the district’s favor. Some parents felt their input carried less weight than that of district staff members. But after a few sometimes tense meetings, the group worked out the problem and managed to work together well and in a more egalitarian fashion. For example, the district had originally pushed to schedule the community forum for early December, but the

community members on the team persuaded the district to change the date to January because of concerns that community members would be distracted with holidays and vacations looming.

About 400 invitations to the community forum were sent, with follow-up phone calls described by organizers as “intense.” The event, held Jan. 23, 1999, at a downtown church, drew about 140 participants. A reporter from the *San Jose Mercury News* sat in on one of the small group discussions, documenting the process in a positive article that appeared the next day on the front page of the metro section. (See Appendix 2).

As in other sites with a substantial Latino population, planners had wrestled with the pros and cons of different structures for dealing with a dual-language forum. While it was expected that bilingual Hispanics would participate in every discussion group, the trickier questions arose with Spanish-dominant participants. Should they be placed in the various groups, each with their own translator, or should there be one separate group with a Spanish-speaking moderator? (Care had been taken to include Spanish speakers at the moderator training.) While the latter seemed the best way to create comfortable and free-flowing conversation, there was concern it could lead to a feeling of isolation within that group and work against one of the purposes of the sessions: to provoke dialogue and understanding *across* groups boundaries.

Public Agenda/IEL did not control the proceedings, we only provided advice and support, so the question was left to local organizers, who decided, on balance, the

best idea was to create a Spanish language group so participants could talk freely. Participant handouts were translated into Spanish, and a bilingual moderator was assigned to the group, which, while smaller than organizers would have liked, was lively and proud of its discussion and the event.

Several themes emerged from the small group discussions: the need for higher expectations for all San Jose students; concern for inadequate parental involvement; and communication gaps between school and home – including a lack of clarity about district standards already in place. A majority of those responding to the participant survey said they wanted more discussion on the issue of standards because there was a lack of information about them.

The district's next step after the forum was to mail participants responses to each of the follow-up ideas they suggested, with announcements of its plans. For example, under a request to "develop an action plan for increasing community ... and parental involvement," the district announced, as a first step, its first "school climate survey," to glean information on each school's immediate community. The survey was sent to all students in grades 4-12, teachers and a third of district parents, and questions covered everything from curriculum to the school's physical appearance to safety. With the data tallied, a school performance report has been issued for each school in the district. The survey, along with new school report cards, will now be an annual event.

Also, in response to the request for data on standards, which was raised in the small group discussions, the district chose to focus on standards in a series of

regional conversations this fall. Loosely divided by geography, the six forums will include discussions with a cross-section of community members about standards in that area's schools. Planning has been largely initiated by school district personnel, with help from parent groups and school staff. To begin each meeting, a district representative will give an overview of the standards for graduation, grade promotion, etc., and show a videotape currently in the works featuring business executives from Silicon Valley talking about the need for qualified students. The video would ostensibly draw links between academics and standards and students' future careers. The rest of the time includes small-group discussions about the schools.

Drawing on lessons learned in terms of the amount of time needed to reach uninvolved community members, organizers of the upcoming forums plan to have half the invited group be active community members who are asked to bring someone with them who is uninvolved. This system, it is hoped, would extend the reach into the community as well as cut down on time and personnel needed to recruit participants. District officials are confident that this system, along with the more localized scope of the sessions, including some in mostly Hispanic neighborhoods, leads to a better turnout among Spanish-speaking residents.

Although the district and planning team considered the initial community conversation a success, they hope regional forums might have more of an impact on the school level. As one parent said, "It's nice to get a turnout of 140 people, but when you have a district with 33,000 people, it's tough for that to have a

big impact.” A conversation more focused on a particular neighborhood and a particular school may spur more people to participate, thinking their input would be more effective, and may lead to more concrete action aimed at specific schools.

The single-school focus has manifested in another way since the original forum by one of its participants, a wealthy resident and local graduate who had begun wondering how to help the schools. Rather than look at the entire district – which includes students from very poor and very wealthy neighborhoods over 24 miles – he zeroed in on a single high school, forming a foundation and raising \$100,000 to transform the school into a technology-laden, school-to-career center. A new business-like governance model has been structured there, with the principal working with a project manager on school-related issues. It sprang from the concept of having schools and the community – in this case, a technology- and business-heavy community – collaborate to improve schools. District staff had been encouraging him to include wider community engagement beyond specific school-business partnerships as a component of the program, and his participation in the forum reinforced that idea dramatically. This community leader is now in the process of working with other high schools around other San Jose schools.

Just as one resident is trying to develop the idea of community and schools working together, so too is the San Jose district trying to entrench the concept of public engagement in its school. It recently created a department specifically for public engagement programs, which includes the new annual district survey and report cards, as well as ongoing forum

work. And the National School Public Relations Association recently awarded the district a top award for its public engagement model, citing the district’s “analysis of the need, planning to meet the need, execution and communication of the program and formal evaluation,” a plan that includes its community conversations.

In contrast to the communities in the other case studies, public engagement in San Jose is clearly being driven by the school district. But school officials still realized the importance of getting other people not usually associated with schools to the table – local businesses, community groups, senior citizens and parents. And this aspect of its initiative, the commitment to getting a cross-section of the community involved on the planning team and as invited guests, resonated with those who participated and led to its success.



Initiating Public Engagement from the Grassroots in Manchester, Connecticut

The story of community dialogue in Manchester, Connecticut, is testament to the power and difficulties of grassroots efforts to mobilize around issues previously ignored by leaders and decision makers.

About 52,000 people live in Manchester, which sits just outside Hartford. Long a blue-collar town, an influx of professionals in recent years has mixed the incomes so there is a noticeable disparity between the haves and have-nots in town. The minority population, mostly African American, stands at around 12% and growing.

A nine-member school board governs the district and its 7,800 students, although it is not a taxing body. The board develops and sets a budget, for example, but must seek approval from the town Board of Directors. The town can essentially view the budget as a recommendation and set the spending at or below the district's proposed level, which has been known to occur.

In 1997 the Connecticut Community Conversation Project (see Bridgeport case study) sent out applications for a community dialogue to several agencies in Manchester, including the town Board of Directors, the Board of Education and the teachers' union, none of whom were interested. But the project caught the attention of Pam Broderick and Nancy Pappas, who were active in local and statewide PTA. The two friends tossed around the idea and decided to apply, not expecting to be given any serious

consideration. They were chosen, and then panicked at the thought of making it work.

They followed planning advice from Public Agenda/IEL closely, not choosing a discussion topic beforehand, for example, but rather moving the planning team, once chosen, through a lengthy process to pick a topic. One statewide project consultant said, "Whereas some other sites have professional people taking this on as an add-on and boiling down the planning process looking for shortcuts, because they were volunteers they had the time to do it the best way."

This was a grassroots project in its purest form: Pam Broderick was a stay-at-home mom with a crafts business on the side, and Nancy Pappas was a freelance writer with a part-time job. They therefore had at least some time and energy to devote to the project. But why did they choose to spend hundreds of hours, unpaid, organizing a community forum about education they knew the school district wasn't interested in touching?

Nancy Pappas explained that "the art of communicating has intrinsic value, and to bring together groups of people who don't usually coalesce seemed to me exceptional. It was a metaphor for everything that was [needed]." For example, the board and district staff would, from time to time, convene panels to study an issue for months, sometimes years, but then would drop the subject with no action taken or discussion of what had happened. One resident's description of school change in Manchester would hold for many communities: "It's like turning an oil tanker. There's just a lot of inertia."

From the start, the lead organizers believed that a process of community dialogue and mobilization was an important part of the answer to the problem. In fact, they “didn’t really care” about the topic of discussion because they felt “the process of dialogue in and of itself was the healing for this town.”

Eight organizations ultimately served on the planning team, although, as is often the case, some were more active than others. To determine their discussion topic, they reviewed the menu of materials prepared by Public Agenda/IEL, asking themselves which would be the topic that, in their view, the town would most benefit from discussing. The group felt that the most pressing issue in Manchester at the time was racial integration and educational equity.

Manchester was on the state’s list of communities that might need to respond to the integration challenge posed by the court case *Sheff v. O’Neil*, depending on its outcome. Many in town were worried about the best way to proceed if the state forced them to act, and others just thought it was an important topic in a town with four elementary schools, two largely white and two largely African American.

This was an issue that Public Agenda had researched and prepared especially for the Connecticut Community Conversation project and was the only one presented without the use of a video discussion starter. The Manchester group decided to create a homemade video, working off a script developed with help from Public Agenda. A local college professor volunteered to film and edit the tape, one of the many community resources the group would seek out to help with the project.

The video, despite its amateur flaws, succeeded in helping the 90 or so participants discuss these potentially divisive issues. The forum was held at a local hospital on a Tuesday night in May 1998, with a good mix of residents of all races, ages and backgrounds. Organizers had sent handwritten invitations, plus the name of the person who had suggested them, to keep it as personal and welcoming as possible. The self-addressed, stamped return card also left space for invitees to say whether they would need translation, transportation or childcare. A Head Start teacher had agreed to supply the names of five non-English speaking families, whom the organizers invited by visiting them at home. Two of them reportedly cried, they were so happy to be invited.

The forum began with dinner at 5 p.m. and was over by 9:30 p.m. Most of the project stipend went to the food, including an elaborate dessert table in the hall after the group discussions, to ensure participants wouldn’t leave before the final plenary.

Participants split into five discussion groups, with observers from the school district at each one. Conversations were rich, lively and constructive. Some discussions, for example, grappled with the pros and cons of neighborhood-based elementary schools and of distributing students around the district to combat racial imbalances. There was also discussion – and some healthy disagreement – about how much equity exists across the district and about how equity ought to be defined.

That the organizers had managed to reach beyond “the usual suspects” was indicated in post-meeting

surveys, in which more than half (51%) said this was the first public meeting they had attended in at least a year. Despite the tough issues, the majority of participants said they enjoyed the dialogue and wanted to continue the discussions, many writing that they saw it as a way to move beyond the usual “we-they” syndrome of blaming others.

Given the success of their forum, what happened next was all the more frustrating to Nancy Pappas, Pam Broderick and Rosemary Talmadge, who had by then joined as the third lead volunteer organizer. They had compiled a list of recommendations, based on the surveys and forum notes, and presented them to the superintendent, who, unfortunately, did nothing with them. Instead, the district, which was beginning a strategic planning process, began convening a series of meetings about neighborhood schools and racial divisions at the elementary level, to which the conversation organizers were not invited. The three organizers then sent out a survey to those who had participated, asking if they wanted to be involved in the strategic planning. That list was then forwarded to the superintendent, who, it was hoped, would be grateful for a list of willing volunteers. Again he did not call any of those on the list, perhaps preferring a public outreach process that was more firmly in his control.

Whether the district’s move to hold public discussions on race and education ought to be viewed as a victory (constructive action on the part of the district had been stimulated) or as a defeat (a real process of citizen engagement had been co-opted) remains to be seen. The organizers themselves remained undaunted, and decided to plan a second forum. They discovered that

the graduating class of 1997 had a dropout rate of 34% over four years of high school, and ranked eighth in the state for dropout rates, although it is not one of the state’s largest districts. After confronting the school board at a public meeting and getting no response, they knew they had found their second forum topic.

Amid the planning for the next event, Manchester got a new superintendent, Alan Beitman, who took office in July 1999. The possibilities for a better relationship between the public engagement organizers and the district appeared possible when he contacted them within several days of taking office.

The next forum was held on a stormy Saturday morning in September 1999, at the local community college. Despite the weather and early hour (it started at 8:30 a.m.) about 110 people turned out to discuss the dropout situation in Manchester. In lieu of a video discussion starter, four approaches to the issue in use in communities around Connecticut were presented, after which participants discussed the ideas in small, moderated sessions. The forum, which was covered by the Hartford *Courant*, proved lively and constructive, with many participants saying they appreciated the structured format and the attention paid to drawing a diverse group of people. One participant, a postal worker, explained that, “This conversation made me realize that I don’t have all the answers myself, but maybe as a group we could come up with something. It’s like the sum of all parts equals the whole.”

That’s an apt description not just of the dialogue, but of the volunteer efforts in organizing both events.

Because the organizers were not entrenched in the school system or a local agency or any other institution, and because they had no clout to attract people on their own, they had to take even more pains to recruit participants and persuade them that these discussions were vital to the success of students. And though they did much of the nuts and bolts organizing, they needed to be creative and draw help from as many quarters as they could. This included getting a middle school student to videotape the second forum (and double as chair mover), the community college to donate the space gratis, local bakeries and friends to bake cakes and breads, the Head Start teacher to recruit non-English speakers, the professor to make a video discussion starter, the police department to donate a coffee maker, and on and on.

One lesson to be learned from this is that the impetus for such work can come from anyone concerned about a community, or as Nancy Pappas said, “If a virgin like me could go ahead with this, anyone can.” But if the grassroots aspect of this endeavor can reap such promising results, so too does it have its own set of challenges. If anyone with the will and energy, such as a concerned parent, can organize community conversations, the question then becomes, “Who has power to follow up?” (For more on this, see Lessons Learned section.)

Much depends, of course, on the attitude of school officials and decision makers. It’s one thing for a district, which has the power to alter policy or programs, to organize a forum to get community input. It can be quite another for a group of parents to hold a session on sensitive education issues with no certainty anyone with decision making ability will

listen. In those cases where the district is indifferent or hostile it is important that organizers seek other institutional anchors in the community to support ongoing public engagement. Local education or community foundations or local businesses, for example, can support public engagement activities when official school support is lacking.

In the case of Manchester, around the same time the forum on dropouts was being planned, the school district appointed an advisory committee to study the issue (whether this was before or after the second forum topic was announced is in dispute) which is scheduled to report to the board in late fall. This has left the community conversation organizers unsure whether the opinions and suggestions of the 110 participants will be heard or shunted aside. What the volunteers of Manchester had hoped would happen with these forums – ingraining the importance of listening to parents and other community members in school officials – has not, yet.

Inner-City Public Engagement: Community Conversations in Two Brooklyn Neighborhoods

In two Brooklyn neighborhoods with histories of conflict and failed schools, hundreds of residents defied those reputations by banding together for serious discussions of school reform. In one case – East New York – district officials, parents and the community tried, with limited success, to continue their dialogue beyond a single forum. But that first discussion did succeed in joining the disparate members of the neighborhood, albeit for a single evening, in common resolve, and did lead to some small steps by the district to make schools more accessible for parents. The lessons of that case informed our work in the second neighborhood, Crown Heights, where after a very successful initial forum, ambitious activities are now underway to build on it to improve schools.

New Visions for Public Schools, a private nonprofit local education fund serving all of New York City, provided the impetus for public engagement in Community School Districts 19 (East New York) and then 17 (Crown Heights). New Visions was interested in working in city districts to “strengthen standards-based reform through public engagement” and applied to be part of the *Public Conversations* national demonstration project of Public Agenda and IEL. New Visions assembled a planning team by talking with community leaders and local organizations and by drawing up a list of potential local players. It took several months of outreach to draft a team, which included a parent, police officers, a housing agency and other social service groups.

School District 19 serves 25,000 children in East New York, from kindergarten through eighth grade. More than three-quarters of its pupils are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Forty-one percent speak a primary language other than English, and the racial demographics are mixed: 53% black, 40% Hispanic, 4% Asian and 2% white. The superintendent, Richard Riccobono, said early in the planning process that with a large immigrant population unfamiliar with the school system and many parents working more than one job to make ends meet, the district had a difficult time involving parents, and such involvement itself had at times become politicized. The conversation topic – standards – was therefore a good choice, he believed.

Held in September 1997, the Community Conversation drew 94 participants, most of whom were parents of school-age children, with some business people, school administrators, teachers, students and leaders of community based organizations also attending. The majority also belonged to civic organizations such as the PTA and the East New York Urban Youth Corps. A Spanish speaker translated the opening and closing plenary sessions and one of the moderators conducted one of the small group discussions in Spanish.

Superintendent Riccobono attended the forum, welcoming the entire group and praising the event as a way to break down barriers and allow neighbors to unite around their children. He added he hoped it would mark the beginning of a partnership among schools, parents and organizations.

The four-hour event proved lively and engaging, with participants of all backgrounds reporting it was an unusual event from their perspective, that they liked the format and felt it had been a productive session. Ninety three percent of participants said they liked having a diverse group at the meeting and suggested including religious leaders, more students and more police at future events.

The next morning, members of the planning team met to compare notes and begin to plan next steps. One member of the planning group said the entire planning process had been a pleasant and productive experience that involved a good mix of community organizations and neighborhoods. Another called the Community Conversation “historic” and felt the positive energy was the beginning of something important, but feared it might dissolve into old routines if the group did not use the momentum to push for change.

In reflecting on what had been learned by listening to the groups, the planners noted:

- the desire of the community to be involved
- parental need for more information on their child’s education
- the need to involve and empower non-English speakers
- the need to restructure PTA policies.

Forum participants had also stressed that standards would only succeed if parent involvement and parent-school communications were improved. In response, the school district, with help from New Visions, surveyed parents and teachers about how welcoming

the schools were perceived to be. Based on those findings, the district chose to create a group comprised of a principal and another staff member from five schools, a New Visions consultant, and several community organizations. This group met monthly to discuss ways to make schools more accessible to parents. A year of meetings led to some simple and practical changes, such as the time of PTA meetings and the creation of “welcome portfolios,” books in the front lobby of the school with pictures of students and school contact phone numbers.

In the 1998-99 school year, this group from East New York continued to meet at the behest of New Visions, to discuss pending school leadership teams comprised of parents and staff, a directive from the city Board of Education. However, no real action was taken and the group eventually fizzled. In the view of one community organization member, the lack of major initiatives stemming from the initial forum was the result of a lack of funding for follow-up activities and volunteer energy, as well as district ambivalence and a dynamic among planning team members in which they became too dependent on New Visions. “There would not have been a group without New Visions.” The organizers had not developed enough of an independent identity to carry on the work.

The East New York forum, as part of the original national *Public Conversations* demonstration project, was designed with one main question in mind: Could a diverse group of neighbors have an honest and civil discussion about the local schools? The answer, of course, turned out to be, “Yes.” What Public Agenda/IEL and New Visions failed to do from the outset was help the community conceive of a long-

term strategy grown out of the engagement. Our assumption was that we could help local organizers get started, give them the tools and training, and then send them off on their own in whatever direction they chose to take. In many communities, this has worked just fine. But what we learned from East New York and other places, is that there are myriad rules to public engagement, some of which are adaptable, but more importantly, others of which are indispensable to sustained, successful public engagement. This concept will be further developed in the next sections, but for now, we have found a few must-haves: diversity among organizers and participants, a sense of shared mission and investment by local organizers – many of whom are often volunteers, and a long-term vision.

To be sure, there will always be dynamics particular to each community that affect the process, but these are key elements we have found common to all successful, enduring public engagement ventures. Where East New York fell short of its potential, and Crown Heights so far has not, appears to be due primarily to the ownership and leadership of community members and school officials.

New Visions, in partnership with Public Agenda, received a grant in 1999 to repeat the work of District 19 in a second district. Because of a prior relationship between New Visions and Dr. Evelyn Castro of District 17 through work around academic standards, that district, which covers Crown Heights and the small East Flatbush neighborhood, was chosen.

Public engagement in Crown Heights, as of this writing, is a work in progress. A diverse group of

community leaders worked hard to make its initial community conversation a success, it is struggling to sustain the momentum. So far, what happened in this strife-weary neighborhood in just a few months has been instructive in what can happen when committed neighbors of all backgrounds work together toward a goal – in this case, to help all children achieve in school.

First, it is important to understand some history of the neighborhood to put the recent developments in proper context. In 1991, riots erupted after a car from a rabbinical motorcade struck and killed a 7-year-old African American boy. Racial tensions flared after the first ambulance on the scene, manned by a volunteer squad from the Jewish community, took only injured Jewish people to the hospital (although some reports had the police directing the action). In the immediate aftermath, a group of angry black youths stabbed to death a Jewish graduate student visiting from Australia, evidently in revenge. Over three days, 43 civilians and 152 police officers were injured, scarring Crown Heights to this day. Since these tragic events racial tensions have abated, but few would say the issues are resolved.

District 17 has 27,000 pupils from kindergarten through eighth grade. Many are recent immigrants from the Caribbean and West Indies, and the rest of the children in the district are African American and Hispanic; most are poor. The white children of the neighborhood are almost all Hasidic and attend private religious schools, and because of the complex history of the neighborhood, representatives of the various groups all sit on the district school board.

Organizing a planning team, Maureen Houtrides of New Visions took a tack similar to East New York. She canvassed the neighborhood, talking with leaders and organizations to amass a list of potential collaborators, then called each one to pique their interest. That work was made easy because of the neighborhood's large and varied collection of social service agencies and cultural and religious institutions. The planning group wound up with about a dozen committed members, including a Hasidic rabbi, police officers, ministers, and representatives from the library, two local museums, a senior center and a mediation center.

The leadership of Jesse Hamilton Jr., who heads the Crown Heights Service Center, proved to be the linchpin holding together this band of assorted community players. Although neither he nor any other Crown Heights community group initiated the public engagement work, he understood the mission of the project and its potential for the neighborhood, becoming a champion of this process. The difficulty, however, was in weaning the planning group of hands-on support provided by Public Agenda and New Visions after the initial forum. Breaking the local teams of that reliance has proven a delicate matter, one which is partly a result of having the initiative come from an outside group rather than from within the neighborhood.

In an ideal world, the initiative for engaging the public would come from the community itself, committed to such a concept. But we also know that, because of the way school boards and administrations usually run, this is a learned idea. As such, it sometimes requires outsiders to introduce the concept to a

community, albeit one willing to keep an open mind and try new methods of communicating.

The Crown Heights organizers, who have since talked about incorporating into a nonprofit entity to apply for funding to further such dialogue, worked in earnest to plan their conversation. The group met monthly, rotating meeting sites among the churches, museums and community organization offices. A week before the community forum, the state and city released the results of their new fourth grade reading tests, showing that two-thirds of the pupils failed. In Crown Heights, only 24% of fourth graders passed. Rather than feeling dispirited by these results, the organizers reinforced their commitment to the necessity of such a discussion, whose topic was academic standards and expectations.

The group invited about 400 people, including politicians ranging from schools Chancellor Rudy Crew to Mayor Rudy Giuliani to Gov. George Pataki. None of the politicians, save some local council members, attended the forum held June 9, 1999, at Medgar Evers College. But the 130 people who did participate represented all the various segments of the community, from public, private and home-schooled students and parents to Hasidic residents, business people and senior citizens. The event began with dinner, and included a table of Kosher food so the Hasidic neighbors would feel comfortable. From the start, no tensions were noticeable and in fact, the various groups of people seemed genuine in their greetings of one another.

Welcoming speakers included Superintendent Castro and three district principals, all of whom talked about success and ways to improve schools. Also, a young

lady who had won local, city and statewide storytelling contests got rousing applause for her remarks to the group about success and set the tone for the evening: relaxed and comfortable.

Participants split into five discussion groups, and the two-hour talk produced lively, friendly debate about how to help children meet the new standards. Indeed, more than 70% rated this forum more useful in helping them understand the issue than TV news programs, newspaper coverage, discussions among politicians or “experts,” and school board meetings. One elderly man, upon leaving the forum, remarked with excitement, “We should have done this 25 years ago.” He added that in his lifetime of living in Crown Heights, this was the first community event he found interesting and productive.

Most participants (75%) also wanted more discussion on the topic, specifically, about how to get more parents, teachers and community members involved in helping students achieve. The planning group didn’t want to lose the momentum begun with the forum, and chose to use the ensuing summer months to develop some detailed activities and plan for an ongoing campaign. Within a month of the forum, the team sent to all participants--in fact to all those who were invited including those who didn’t attend--a summary of the discussions, a letter from the superintendent and an invitation to be part of continued talks. Original participants had agreed that the topics begging for real dialogue and action were parental involvement, community-school partnerships, and school-community communications. Therefore, people were invited to join small work groups on each of those three topics. The groups met for three two-

hour sessions throughout October, each with a pair of trained moderators, to develop action recommendations around their chosen topic. A forum is planned for November to present the ideas to school administrators and the community at large.

The district administration was involved from the start, though peripherally at first. A district administrator occasionally attended a planning meeting, and many participated in the forum itself. But organizers realized that if many concrete action ideas were to come to fruition, active district support would be needed. They briefed the superintendent in September about their next steps, explaining the work groups and what they hoped to accomplish. She devoted several hours to the group, and appointed two of her senior staffers to each of the work groups. In addition, she pledged to take a serious look at the plans developed by these grassroots groups and see if she could help bring them to life. Although she had signed on early, she was not active in planning the initial forum. Since then, she has come to realize that she needs the community as much as they need her, to reach their common goal of helping students succeed. The district has also set aside a small, but noteworthy amount of funds for Maureen Houtrides to continue her work with the district. There is also early talk of developing a third phase of dialogue, centered on individual schools in the district.

The differences in the two Brooklyn initiatives are noteworthy. Both essentially started from the same place, but each took divergent paths. Neither community initiated public engagement on its own, but both created diverse planning groups and were able to organize well-attended, stimulating forums.

So why the difference in long-term outcomes? One possible explanation is that Crown Heights, from the outset, conceived the community forum as a first step toward something larger. East New York, on the other hand, was more concerned with simply putting on a single event and didn't think about how to follow up until afterward. In addition, Crown Heights produced a natural local leader in Jesse Hamilton, who could take the reins and make the initiative a true neighborhood effort. In East New York, no such leadership emerged. And in Crown Heights, district officials increasingly lent their support to the public engagement work, while in East New York such commitment waned after the initial forum.

But despite the differences in long-term outcomes, what both communities demonstrate is that it is possible to engage the public in a political, diverse, sometimes tense, urban neighborhood. What appear as hurdles from the outset – bureaucracy, infighting, histories of discord – need not hinder attempts at public engagement. In fact, the community organizers were able to draw from the variety of ethnicities, ages and backgrounds of its residents for discussions more rich and interesting than many others we have seen.

V. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION: LESSONS LEARNED

After working on scores of public engagement efforts in communities and school districts across the nation, we have learned some lessons that guide our current work. This section covers several broad observations about the nature and results of public engagement, and the next offers a set of practical "rules for organizers" concerning what works and what doesn't in the trenches.

In brief, the major points covered in this section are:

Lesson 1:

True public engagement is a learned concept, because the way school systems and citizens typically operate is antithetical to community dialogue and school-community collaboration.

Lesson 2:

When given a good opportunity to deliberate, citizens are less extreme, more civil, and more willing to compromise than they are often given credit for.

Lesson 3:

Political and policy sophistication are not prerequisites for participation.

Lesson 4:

While no easy task, it is possible to engage a broad cross section of citizens in constructive dialogue in virtually every kind of school community by applying several basic principles and strategies. Follow-up and long-term impact, however, vary widely by community and thus require localized strategies.

Lesson 5:

Public engagement can be a powerful engine for, and complement to, typical school-based approaches to school improvement that creates a sense of shared responsibility.

Lesson 1:

True public engagement is a learned concept, because the way school systems and citizens typically operate is antithetical to community dialogue and deliberation.

It seems like common sense, the idea that the best way to work through an issue of community concern is to get together all kinds of residents, especially average citizens, to share views and listen to one another, deliberating as a group. But this is not how things work. For reasons discussed in Section II, such as the “we know better than you” attitude, administrators and other education leaders typically either avoid the public or try to sell them on a predetermined course of action. Many citizens, for their part, either remain uninvolved or approach school issues armed for a fight rather than in search of a solution.

Resistance to public engagement can take many forms. Based on prior experience, many school officials have concluded that the public is a problem to be managed rather than a collection of citizens to be engaged. And even those willing to entertain the latter idea struggle with an anticipated loss of control entailed in true public engagement. (That’s why if superintendents do not feel a measure of anxiety before their district’s first community conversation we worry that something’s wrong). Sometimes administrators think they can simply delegate public engagement to the appropriate staffer and assume it will get done, even if that person has not absorbed the ways in which real engagement differs from conventional public relations.

For their part, community activists do not always appreciate the role less active citizens can play in solving problems. In a recent meeting a local organizer asked us, quite sincerely, why she should go to the trouble of recruiting inactive parents to a forum. Her thinking seemed to be that since only a small minority of active parents do most of the work, reaching out to the rest could be a waste of energy. Others are all for including the broader community, but mostly so they can be mobilized on behalf of a preset agenda. Or, they are so focused on action that they have trouble leaving adequate space for deliberation. They feel they’ve got to come out of a single forum with a completed action plan, which, unfortunately, is not a realistic expectation and can warp the process rather than move it along.

In our experience, even organizers who are convinced of the importance of true public engagement too frequently fall back into old ways of thinking and doing business. They may need help wrestling with the concept again and again throughout the planning process until it sinks in. School officials sometimes must be reminded that the need for public engagement does not mean the district is necessarily doing something wrong, just that educating children requires a comprehensive approach that includes parents, community members and the schools as partners. Citizens may need to be reminded that *their* immediate interest group is but one part of the larger community, and that real effort is needed to ensure inclusiveness. But eventually many school officials and community members come to appreciate the usefulness, and in fact the desirability, of reaching out in an honest attempt to bridge communication gaps, and over time attitudes and practices begin to change.

The Experience Convinces the Skeptics

Given what typically passes for public conversation these days – the squawk of talk radio, sound-bite-driven candidate debates, the stiff procedure of school board or town council meetings – there is no guarantee that people would find a more deliberative and civil format engaging. Indeed, people often do not seem to arrive at forums with the highest of expectations. Some are jaded and expect to be either bored or harangued, but were persuaded to attend by the personal appeal of a respected acquaintance or the need to be on top of developments that could affect them. Others, having never attended a public meeting, do not know quite what to expect, but are lured by free food and mild curiosity to take the time to attend.

Despite different starting points, the majority of people embrace a well-constructed forum. For many participants it is an eye opener: They have never experienced anything quite like it and are taken with the possibilities. Indeed, the most frequent complaint in post-meeting surveys is that there wasn't enough discussion time, and it is not unusual for conversations to spill into the hallways and parking lots after the formal session has adjourned – and this after having committed four hours of their precious time.

It takes hard work to get local players to absorb the concept of public engagement, to design and organize forums where constructive dialogue can occur, and to use them as a platform for collaboration on behalf of schools and students. But it is worth the energy, as people often make real connections with one another, and set important new steps in motion.



Lesson 2:

When given a good opportunity to deliberate, citizens are less extreme, more civil, and more willing to compromise than they are often given credit for.

Earlier we discussed the public's typical role in the status quo of school-community relations as either "opting out" or "crashing in." And this, in our experience, is the image of the general public that administrators, teachers and local officials often hold. They are therefore pleasantly surprised at the civility and ability of citizens to engage issues in well-constructed forums.

One superintendent who observed a forum in an urban New Jersey district watched the small discussion groups in amazement. The local organizers had done a good job of recruiting parents who had never shown up for regular school functions. The superintendent was especially impressed by the sophistication with which people with no background and experience in the policy issues were examining the challenges laid before them.

Organizers, moderators and even participants themselves are often surprised at the constructive quality of the proceedings. It is always interesting, for example, to compare the fears and trepidations of moderators during training with their perceptions after the event. In some instances, even hard cases well-known for their abrasive ways change their approach as they absorb the intent and norms of the proceedings.

One such instance occurred at a small community forum on parental involvement in a rural Nevada district. The superintendent and school board members, who were present as observers, had invited about 20 diverse participants. Shortly before the discussion began, an uninvited guest arrived who had run unsuccessfully for the school board and had acted as a gadfly ever since. The moderator welcomed him, and asked him his interest. He replied that he was there to talk about the new district building in which the meeting was taking place, which he considered a waste of tax dollars. The moderator informed him that the topic for the session was parental involvement, but that he was welcome to participate nevertheless, if he wished. He did, and after jumping into the discussion to take a few early shots at school officials, he seemed to become taken with the spirit of the proceedings, and to adjust to the norms the group was establishing. He began to focus more on the topic, wait his turn, make more constructive comments, and at the end, to the amazement of the superintendent and board members observing, he expressed appreciation for the opportunity to participate.

Such reactions arise, more than anything else, from moments during the discussions where people--sometimes two, sometimes an entire group--connect with one another in a personal and transforming way. One example took place in a rural Kentucky county forum titled "How to Help All Students Succeed in a Diverse Society," where local organizers wanted to see if and how people would discuss the impact of

race on education.³³ As one black mother was explaining how black parents get labeled by school staff as “difficult” if they complain too loudly or too often about treatment of their children, a local district judge, a white man, squirmed. The moderator drew him out, and he said, very softly, that he didn’t think everything was always about race. Then the woman, in language indicative of a lack of formal education, asked him to close his eyes, pretend he was a 6-year-old black child and take a walk through town with her. They visited the bank and saw only white tellers, the grocery store had only white cashiers, same at the cleaners, the pharmacy, etc. They encountered some black people along the way, but they were janitors. The man let this sink in for a few moments, then sat back in his chair, nodding his head. That episode seemed to change his entire way of looking at the issue, simply by putting himself in her shoes and allowing his mind to be opened, and the group and observers seemed equally effected. This exchange could never have happened at a typical school meeting.

What People Value

The openness of the conversation is in fact one feature people mention most frequently in post-meeting surveys and interviews. The other thing they like most is the diversity of participants, in terms of background, age, occupation, etc. Contrary to the popular wisdom that people would rather stick to their own kind and not fraternize with those who are different, we find that organizers, moderators and

participants alike consider the diversity of participants to be a crucial factor in making forums successful.

In East New York, for example, 96% of participants said the diversity of people at its forum was useful, and 88% said there was a fair cross-section of the community represented. A high school student in Manchester, Connecticut, said she was amazed that “teachers and older people would let me be part of this conversation and actually listen to me and treat me like an equal.” She added that the various experiences and backgrounds of participants are exactly what made the discussion stimulating for her.

³³This was one site in a Public Agenda/Public Education Network demonstration project. Other sites are Baltimore; Paterson, New Jersey; Hattiesburg, Mississippi; Buffalo, New York; Denver; and Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Lesson 3:**Political and policy sophistication are not prerequisites for participation.**

We have found that, given the right conditions, even participants with no background in the policy debate or experience analyzing and discussing issues can participate effectively. These conditions, covered more fully in the next section, include small moderated groups that use carefully crafted discussion materials focusing more on values, broad policy goals and practical tradeoffs than on technical details, and that are rendered without jargon, in the language ordinary citizens use.

Sometimes organizers try to compensate for participants' lack of background by providing informative materials. They ask, "Don't you need to give people accurate background information if you want them to have a rational dialogue?"

While there is certainly a logic to this position, it also has its flaws. Staying current on the research and analyzing data is generally how leaders and professionals develop their own views, and they naturally assume that it's therefore the best way for everyone. And, not infrequently, there seems to be an underlying belief that, "If only they (the uninformed) knew the facts they'd see the light (agree with me)."

One problem with making a forum data-heavy up front is that it gives the advantage to the professionals and "experts" in the room, inevitably moving the focus away from "regular folks" who lack the training and inclination for data-driven conversation.

A second problem is that important data is almost always disputed, making it extremely difficult to present information on a controversial subject in a way that someone won't level the charge of bias against the whole endeavor. This is not to say it's impossible to present data in a nonpartisan manner, and the Kettering/Public Agenda National Issues Forum guides do a good job of this, as does California's EdSource. But it is extremely tricky and takes considerable investment to do it right.

Moreover, too large a focus on data early on tends to miss the point for community members, who speak more from personal experience and values than from the latest research. As a general rule, conversations among professionals are data-driven (at least on the surface – there are often values conflicts lurking beneath the rhetoric) while conversations among the general public tend to be values driven. As Dan Yankelovich explains:

"Most policies depend far more on values than on factual information. In our political system, for policies to be acceptable they must be seen as consonant with a wide range of values such as fairness, freedom, compassion, safety, moral legitimacy, the preservation of social order, and so on. In policies that arouse the most passions and concern, these values often conflict with each other.

...Proposals for education reform to give vouchers to parents so that they can select the school of their choice for their children pit the value of preserving

the public school system against the value of individual choice. Welfare reform that requires mothers of young children to enter the workforce even though doing so may not be good for the children pits fairness against concern for children.

All significant social policies call for weighing competing values against one another...³⁴

A third problem is that data given beforehand is not necessarily the right information that people need to draw conclusions about an issue. Average citizens are smarter than policy makers tend to give them credit for, and as the discussion proceeds they know what questions they need answered and what information will help them clarify their own position on the issue.

³⁴ Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 1999. Thus, it is not surprising that organizers of the Phi Delta Kappa forums have found that the portion of their sessions dedicated to analyzing data about local schools systems has been the least successful component: "...we quickly learned that participants wanted to talk and were somewhat wary of receiving information that might seem to bias their views." (From *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 1997).

Lesson 4:

While no easy task, it is possible to engage a broad cross-section of citizens in constructive dialogue in virtually every kind of school community by applying several basic principles and strategies. Follow-up and long-term impact, however, vary widely by community and thus require localized strategies.

We know now that citizens of varied backgrounds can engage in serious dialogue on education issues, and that such dialogue can set in motion significant forces for change. What we have also learned is that this engagement can occur just about anywhere, despite the complexities that differentiate school communities from one another.

To do this requires adherence to several basic principles and strategies that, with minor variations, seem to apply across the board. In our experience, the quality of community conversations (the diversity of participants, the civility of the dialogue, a stimulating exchange of ideas, etc.) has less to do with the nature of the community than on following such “rules.” In one large urban site where we have worked, for instance, the school system leading the initiative refused to bring community partners on board to help sponsor and organize the initiative. As a result, turnout was lower and less diverse than in other urban sites where schools and community partners worked together from the start.

Thus, while there is some variation from site to site (e.g., multilingual vs. monolingual forums) and some questions that need further attention (e.g., the best strategies for recruiting and including some groups)

the basic principles for creating successful forums are now fairly clear. Certainly, a great deal of hard work is involved, but at least we have a good sense of what that work is and how to help communities master the tasks. As discussed in greater detail in the next section, we are talking about how forums are structured, how participants are recruited, how issues are selected and presented to participants, how discussion groups are composed and moderated, how data is collected, and so on. Applying these basic ideas has allowed farming villages in the Nebraska plains, suburbs in Connecticut and Minnesota, and inner-city neighborhoods in New York all to engage their citizens in productive dialogue about their schools.

Our experience also shows that what happens as a result of community conversations varies widely, and whereas the steps to successful forums are essentially the same from place to place, the steps to successful follow-up and long-term impact can differ dramatically. For example, San Jose changed policies around academic standards as the district responded to the community, and a department was created to make public engagement ongoing. In several small towns in central Connecticut, where the same community conversation format was followed, community and business groups raised money to provide mini-grants for teachers who are developing innovative ways to involve parents. And in New Orleans a poorly organized forum did not lead to any discernable results whatsoever.

What accounts for the variety of results? While more research is needed, the answer we offer here has to do with the following three questions:



- (1) Who are the organizers and what are their goals?
- (2) How committed and skilled are the organizers?
- (3) What are the obstacles and opportunities in the environment?

Who Are the Organizers and What Are Their Goals?

Good community dialogue will tend to generate more possibilities for follow-up than can be acted upon. Because of this, the identity and goals of organizers will affect the follow-up that occurs.

Are the local organizers a parents group, a school district, the chamber of commerce, a local or statewide coalition? Is the teachers union involved, or a local education fund? All of these are possibilities. And whereas a parents group may be naturally inclined and well suited to pick up on one aspect of a community forum, a teachers union may be inclined to respond differently. For instance, imagine a forum on academic expectations and standards where school choice and parental involvement received a great deal of attention. A parents group may be comfortable following up on both themes, while a teachers union may be more comfortable concentrating on parental involvement than on the question of choice.

The Role of the District.

One key question for follow-up is the position of the local district. Although there are exceptions, the best outcomes usually seem to unfold when the district is a partner with community groups in a public engagement leadership team, instead of being either the sole instigator or completely out of the loop. With the district on board, it's relatively easy to respond to some of the suggestions and concerns that arise in community conversations, such as the need for better

information about school policy. And quick follow-up allows momentum to build, which can be more difficult to achieve if the district is not actively involved, and even more so if the district is outright hostile to the enterprise. If, on the other hand, the district is the sole instigator of public engagement, there will often be some blind spots in the proceedings, where some issues will be too politically tricky and consequently be passed by. For example, the gaps in achievement between different racial groups is a difficult issue that some community members may want to tackle but that some district leaders may feel is too risky to open up.

How Committed and Skilled Are the Organizers?

It's one thing to organize a single community forum, with the goal simply to put on a successful event. It's quite another to propel the momentum of the event into long-term changes in attitude and behavior. To do so requires commitment by the organizers, for example, to marshal new collaborators to the table or take the initiative to find additional funds. In Hartford, for example, a parents group managed to hold two fairly successful community conversations essentially planned at the lead of a single persona within a single parents organization. But this individual was unable to sustain the effort, and there was no one else willing to contribute significantly to develop meaningful follow-up.

What Are the Obstacles and Opportunities in the Environment?

The possibilities for anchoring public engagement locally and having it generate common ground and collective action on behalf of school improvement depend, to some degree, on the unique features of

the community. One town has a cooperative newspaper that plays a constructive role, while another has no newspaper or it's stubbornly hostile. One community has a local foundation or business that gets involved to support the efforts, while another does not. One community has a highly politicized school system mistrusted by many, while in another schools are the last highly respected local institution. All of these factors will affect post-forum strategies and their likelihood for success.

Lesson 5:

Public engagement can be a powerful engine for, and complement to, typical school-based approaches to school improvement that creates a sense of shared responsibility.

Education reform is traditionally the province of school professionals, often at the instigation of district or state leaders. Perhaps the most important lessons from our experiences working with communities on public engagement concern its impact on typical school improvement efforts.

An Engine Driving School Reform

Public engagement often triggers new school-based reforms by identifying areas where attention is needed as well as where community support is most likely to be forthcoming. For example, a major theme of the East New forum involved making the schools more hospitable and user-friendly for parents. In response, the district hired a consultant and created task forces around five schools to work on measures to address the issue. In another example, Waterbury, Connecticut, forum sponsors and several participants worked together to get school district approval for parent coordinators in each school.

Public engagement can also help sweep away impediments to reform from within the system. This was evident in Nebraska, discussed earlier, where the state board broke through its paralysis on standards reform after bringing the public more fully into the discussion. It occurred in another way in Mendota Heights, Minnesota, where the broad-based task force put in place by the school district to organize the original forum continued to grapple with school issues.

The group was ultimately influential in the passage of a referendum to alter the school board structure, adding a seventh member to break the prior deadlocked 3-3 votes.

A Complement to Traditional, School-based Reform

Public engagement provides a means to refine and validate school-based reforms with public input, thus ensuring that a reform measure is well understood by the community and will gain support rather than run into a brick wall. This is the lesson of the Outcomes-Based Education and standards cases discussed in Section I. Similarly, in a Rochester community conversation on academic standards, samples of new standards were presented to participants, and it quickly became clear which were comprehensible to the general public and which needed more work for the sake of clarity and understanding.

This complementary aspect also comes across in connection with a forum on parental involvement in Cobb County, Georgia. Participants were asked to comment on a potential policy initiative that would require parents of disruptive students to attend school to keep their children under control, under threat of charging them with neglect if they failed to cooperate. Most participants were supportive in principle, but a number worried that the parents themselves might be unstable and pose problems on the school bus or in the classroom. The district, in turn, took this angle into account in its subsequent in-house deliberations on the policy.

A More Collaborative Context for School Reform

Perhaps most importantly, public engagement creates a sense of shared responsibility within the community



for the success of reform, and generates new collaborations and initiatives to help ensure it. A good example is Crown Heights, where, as the case study described, the district is working hand-in-hand with citizen committees to develop the supports needed for students to achieve standards.

Another example comes from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where as a result of a 1996 community conversation, which was the first education event encompassing five neighboring school districts, local clergy formed a new group to focus on education issues and one of the members now serves on the board of the local education fund that sponsored the

forum. That fund also successfully applied for a National Science Foundation grant to boost parental involvement in math and science education that will lead to activities in each of the area schools. It cited the community conversation experience in its application, and the lead moderator from the forum is chairing the project. School board members from the five districts involved in the original forum also created a meeting structure for the first time. And the local education fund is now participating in the Public Agenda/Public Education Network community dialogue project on education and race. Thus, a sense of joint responsibility and new partnerships can emerge and one good thing often leads to another.

VI. RULES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANIZERS

Based on our experiences and observations, we have developed a set of guidelines for those trying to organize public engagement in their communities. “Rules” are basic principles that we believe are essential to the success of these endeavors. Beneath each rule are “recommendations,” or strategies, to help local organizers succeed in that area.

The first section focuses on rules for successful forums, the second section on rules for long-term success, and the third on how to deal with issues often encountered in large urban centers.

Rules and Recommendations for **SUCCESSFUL FORUMS**

Rule 1. Conduct community dialogues in small, diverse groups.

If a thoughtful exchange of views is the goal, then clearly the process cannot take place in a huge hall with hundreds of participants and booming microphones; it must take place in small groups. But how small? Our original forums aimed for groups of between 20 and 25 participants, but in working on dozens more since, we have found that groups of about 15 people create a more intimate setting, where it is easier to build trust and give everyone ample opportunities to speak.

Would even smaller groups be better still? Not necessarily, because the smaller the group, the less

diverse, and as noted, organizers, moderators and participants consider the diversity of participants a crucial feature of successful forums. The varied perspectives found in a diverse group create the greatest possibility for new collaborations. Moreover, it is important that no single viewpoint dominate (unless the group reaches, through real dialogue, a degree of consensus) and diversity helps to ensure this.

Recommendations:

► *Diversity is best achieved by establishing a diverse planning group and employing a personal outreach strategy.* Rather than simply advertising the forums and waiting to see who shows, we find the best results come from personal outreach and networking strategies. The real trick here is that those doing the outreach should have personal standing among those invited.

It follows from this that the planning committee should include diverse members who offer credibility within the various sectors of the community that should be represented at the community conversations. Thus, because a prominent Hasidic rabbi agreed to serve on the planning committee for the Crown Heights forum, the Hasidic community was well represented at the forum.

► *Pay attention to the composition of the small groups.* As discussed, the conversation is enriched if the small groups are diverse. We also find it important that small groups contain no more than 15-20% educators

and no more than another 5-10% “big shots” of any kind. Even when educators and leaders have no intention of overpowering the discussion they tend to do so if their numbers are too large. This is why moderators, while not meant to control the discussion too tightly, are nevertheless trained to keep the more experienced players at bay early on in the discussion, until parents, students and the others in the room find their footing.

Rule 2. Invest time to find and train skilled, nonpartisan moderators and recorders.

As the last point makes clear, moderators play an important role in the success of community conversations, and we have seen again and again that the skill of the moderator has a large impact on the quality of the conversation. Therefore, organizers are well advised to invest the time needed to find the right people for the job and see to it they are adequately trained.

The recorder at a community conversation is another key player, one that is often overlooked. Capturing, on the fly, the gist of people’s comments in such a way that others can make sense of them later is a formidable task, but one that can affect a forum’s outcomes – for the simple reason that it’s hard to follow up on people’s deliberations if the record of what was said is fuzzy.

Recommendations:

► *Select moderators with care.* This is a tricky task, for we have found that prior experience facilitating groups does not always translate to good moderating of these

public conversations. Some, for instance, who are quite skilled at leading workshops and professional meetings do a poor job of working with the general public. And occasionally, people who have never moderated before do a wonderful job.

While the following guidelines can help in selecting moderators, the most important qualifications – “people skills” and a commitment to an open, inclusive dialogue – should be kept in mind regardless of a candidate’s background on paper. That said, look for these other qualities in moderators:

- group facilitation skills/experience, especially in working with diverse groups and with the general public (as opposed to professionals only)
- the ability to help participants articulate the reasoning, experiences and values supporting their positions
- comfort and ability managing group conflict
- the ability to take a nonpartisan moderating stance
- nonpartisan *credibility* – some people may be able to moderate in a nonpartisan manner but, because of past associations, will not be *viewed* in that light by members of the group
- some general familiarity with local issues and education reform debates, although expertise is not required
- overall diversity – the moderators should, within reason, reflect the demographics of the community

Moderators have most frequently been drawn from the following sectors:

- the business community, including trainers and consultants
- the religious community, including pastoral counselors
- social workers and others in community service
- focus group leaders
- higher education
- parent volunteers

They are rarely drawn from within the school system for two reasons. First, while good community conversations steer clear of school-bashing, a significant amount of criticism is often aired, and educators can become defensive. This, of course, makes effective moderating impossible. Second, even educators who are able to maintain a non-defensive and nonpartisan stance will be viewed by many participants as partisan, and that in itself becomes problematic.

► *Select recorders with care.* Recorders must be good listeners who can summarize and synthesize people's points without turning them into meaningless abstractions. And, as they are writing publicly (on flip charts) so everyone sees the group's deliberations being saved for future reference, they must write legibly. Although K-12 educators are rarely used as moderators, they can sometimes fulfill the recorder function quite well, as can reserve moderators.

► *Train moderators and recorders well.* While we've occasionally run into a prodigy who can just glance at the moderator guide and do a fantastic job, this is exceedingly rare, even among very experienced moderators. A full-day training session, with ample time for role play practice, is needed to ensure that

moderators and recorders have internalized the structure and tasks involved. The best scenario is to bring in a team of experienced moderators for a community's initial forum, which local moderators observe as the final component of their training.

Rule 3: Choose themes that are ripe for public engagement

Public engagement is hard work, and organizers and the public both have a limited capacity for it. Citizens cannot engage every issue and decision facing the schools, nor would they want to. One important aspect of this work, therefore, is discerning those issues that are ripe for public engagement from those that would be a waste of time and energy.

Recommendations:

► *Begin by listening to the public.* When choosing themes for discussion, it is always wise to begin by listening to the perceptions and concerns of community members, whether formally through research or through other means of taking the community's pulse. What do people care about with respect to their local schools? What are the education issues that people feel the need to weigh in on, as opposed to those they'd rather delegate to professionals?

► *Compare the public's and the district's agendas.* Ripe themes are those that are on both the public's and the school system's agenda. That way, everyone will be willing to expend the energy needed to make a difference on the issue. For instance, it might do little good to focus on the school system's efforts to increase technology in the classroom if the public is

profoundly concerned at present with school safety. As the school system is probably also concerned with safety, this could be a good place to begin.

► *The issue must be one that those who are leading the effort are willing to talk about.* If a local teachers union, for instance, is a central player in a public engagement leadership team, it may not be able to provide nonpartisan leadership on an issue such as school choice. The issue strikes too close to home.

But this does not mean that school choice should not be on the table – it may be an important topic for community consideration, just that other leadership may need to be found to ferry that issue to the public. Nor does it mean that a union local could not be an effective catalyst for good community conversations on a host of other important school issues – and, in fact, we have a major project underway with the NEA in sites around the country, many of which are producing excellent forums and results.

► *Consider the degree of difficulty.* The theme to be tackled should be important and challenging – or why bother? – but it need not be the *most* challenging issue right off the bat. It's perfectly legitimate to begin a public engagement initiative with, say, parent involvement, and master the skills involved in community engagement before taking on something more highly charged like race and education or school funding.

Rule 4: Frame issues for effective deliberation by making sure they are accessible and offer choices to stimulate discussion

Once a theme is found that makes sense the next question is, “How might issues be framed so as to enable citizens to engage them effectively?” This is very much at the heart of the matter: The format must be structured enough to give people a way to start talking, yet leave room for them to explore the many dimensions of the issue.

Recommendations:

► *Use common language.* Nothing defeats these efforts as quickly as professional jargon, and every effort should be made to purge the proceedings of specialized, insider language. Thus, there are no “rubrics,” “site-based governance structures” or “accountability measures” at community conversations, and certainly no “paradigm shifts” toward “outcomes” or “total quality management.”

► *Don't do a “data dump.”* Earlier we noted that providing data up front at community conversations is tricky and can easily overwhelm the members of the general public. This is why, in our *Public Conversations* projects, we tend to do more with data as a follow-up to the dialogues than as a precursor. Indeed, our initial dialogues tend to be relatively light on data, focusing instead on basic values, philosophical questions, and practical tradeoffs of different approaches to an issue, as well as a beginning exploration of practical solutions. One of the results of these dialogues is “Areas Where We Need More Information,” which allows local organizers to discover what data, as a result of their conversation, *community members* think they need. This, in turn, gives organizers and educators something concrete to respond to: How well is school X doing compared with school Y? Does the district have a policy about

working with suspended students? Data can be used especially well when it is pinpointed to the expressed needs of citizens and offered in the context of their ongoing deliberations.

► *Focus on broad questions concerning fundamental choices and tradeoffs, not on the technical details of policy implementation.* A community conversation must be pitched at a level that the public can deal with. Most citizens are not interested in micromanaging the schools. Rather, they seek to have input and involvement with the basic direction the schools are going, and to contribute to solving whatever glaring problems they feel stand in the way of the success of their community's children. For most community members, the technical details of policy are the proper province of professionals. They would rather invest their energies on big and basic questions, such as, "Are the schools going in the right direction?" and, "How can we help more students succeed?"

► *Frame issues as choices to help citizens weigh the merits of different perspectives and solutions.* Educators who attend community forums tend to be at least somewhat familiar with the contours of the latest policy debate on a topic like academic standards and have relatively developed views. The general public, in contrast, tends to come to a forum with impressions, concerns and a set of values that they feel applies, but little familiarity with the policy debate and the range of likely solutions to an educational problem. It can therefore help the public to provide some structure to their deliberations if several

fundamental choices are presented for their consideration.³⁵

Such "choice frameworks" are hard to put together. They need to be clear and highly accessible, engaging, and fair. It is crucial to test these discussion structures thoroughly before going public to be sure you have captured and presented the issue in a way that will work well in the community conversation setting.

Framing issues into choices accomplishes several things:

- Although the choices are not meant to limit the discussion (if someone wishes to discuss a purpose of education that is not on the video, for example, they are free to put it on the table) a framework provides a focus that keeps the discussion from meandering.
- They create tensions that stimulate people's thinking.
- They spur group discussion as people compare positions and the reasons behind them.
- Presenting different perspectives signals that the materials they are contemplating are nonpartisan and therefore the overall process is a fair one – i.e., it really is an open forum.
- Offering choices helps set a constructive tone, suggesting there is no single, simple answer and

³⁵ "Research on public thinking about scores of public policy issues shows that presenting choices is a far better method for advancing deliberation than merely laying out the arguments for a single solution: Presenting choices gives people a systematic way to consider the consequences of alternative solutions so they can be weighed against each other thoughtfully and judiciously." From Dan Yankelovich and John Immerwahr, "The Rules of Public Engagement," in D. Yankelovich and I.M. Destler (eds.) *Beyond the Beltway: Engaging the Public in U.S. Foreign Policy*, W.W. Norton and Company, 1994.

that listening to others and, perhaps, compromise are in order.

- They are moderator-friendly.

► *When time and resources permit, create video discussion starters that lay out the choices created for the discussion.* Although videos are not essential, they offer several advantages over print presentations. For many people, videos are more engaging than written materials and can help even non-literate members of the group proceed on an equal footing. And hearing a variety of characters react to the choices on tape can help people begin to engage the issues because, inevitably, some remarks will resonate with someone's experience. Thus a participant might say, "What that woman said on the tape, that schools are about more than just getting a job, I liked that, that's what I think too." The moderator can then draw that person out, asking why the statement struck a chord, and the conversation begins as other people react.

*Rules for***LONG-TERM SUCCESS****Rule 1. Establish strong leadership**

Community engagement does not happen on its own; it requires leadership. It is possible to provide technical assistance from the outside, but most of the impetus and sustenance must come from within communities. How can community engagement initiatives start on the right foot, so they have the best chance to succeed, not just in the near term but over time?

Most of our projects have begun with a single community catalyst – a school district, a local education fund, a parents group – but they almost inevitably evolve into a leadership coalition that sponsors and plans the initiative. Multiple partners are important to the success of these ventures because organizers must have three attributes that rarely exist in any single community entity:

- nonpartisanship
- networking/outreach capacity
- organizational capability

Often there are three or four active sponsors, a few others that act more in an advisory/supportive role, and a hands-on planning committee of about a dozen members who make and implement strategic decisions. Neither the sponsoring structure nor the planning team are set in stone and often change membership as forum and follow-up activities take place and new players emerge.

Recommendations:

► *The impetus and leadership should come from within the community.* We've been involved with several projects that were, in one way or another, imposed on local sponsors, and they are always more problematic than ones where the driving force comes from within. Thus, we prefer to give technical assistance through two ways, either by a community request or, if we are able to offer our support through a granted project, through an application process.³⁶

Whoever winds up organizing a local project ought to bring to the effort a sense of purpose, that what they are doing is worth the investment. If a school superintendent, for example, decides to initiate a public engagement campaign, it is important not to assign a staff member to the task who will view it as just another chore. It seems silly to even have to say that the people doing the hands-on work of organizing forums and follow-up should want to be part of the effort, but experiences in a few communities have made it necessary to emphasize the point.

► *Sponsors should balance one another in terms of partisanship and should spark the interest of potential participants.* The combination of sponsors should communicate that (a) all views really are welcome and (b) this really is different. In one community, this might be accomplished through a coalition comprised of the school district, the teachers union, the chamber of commerce and a volunteer parents group; in another by a neighborhood mediation center, the YMCA, a church and a tax watchdog group.

³⁶ An example of the latter was the Connecticut Community Conversation project, described in the Bridgeport case study.

► *Sponsors should balance each other in terms of the talents, assets and resources they bring to the process.* One organization might be important because of its access to a certain segment of the community. Another because of its access to potential moderators or other needed resources. And yet another because of its ability to see that follow-up occurs.

► *If the school district isn't involved at the outset, look for opportunities to bring it on board.*

School leadership need not be the driving force behind public engagement for it to have a significant impact, but if school leaders are totally uninterested, it can make for a less dynamic campaign. If they are downright hostile, the going can be tough indeed.

This does not mean that public engagement should not be attempted without early buy-in by the district, just that there are clear advantages when it is present. It is sometimes the case that the district comes on board – or converts from a half-hearted sponsor to an enthusiastic and active partner – as a result of early forums. Often, these initial events convince administrators that this is a constructive endeavor likely to have an impact, so they are better off taking it seriously.

► *Public engagement initiatives have the greatest chance of long-term success if at least some of the partners offer resources to support long-term action, and this factor should be considered in early coalition-building.* This can be provided by the school system, local business, a local education fund, or a community-based organization with experience in pursuing grants. Preferably more than one

organization will have some organizational capacity and resources so that no single player can dominate, and if one fades in its participation the effort can continue.

Rule 2: Think long term and follow through

A single community conversation, if done well, can accomplish a small, but significant, amount of good. It can sensitize policy makers to community concerns and preferences and even lead to revisions in school policies. It can embolden community members who attend to speak out more confidently and can demonstrate to educators and community members alike that constructive communication is more possible than they had thought. These effects can even extend beyond the immediate participants to others, through the media and through person to person contact in the days and weeks following.

A single community conversation is also, of course, a limited exercise in public engagement. Even if well attended it only involves a small fraction of a community's residents. And a single conversation can only scratch the surface in developing common understanding and forging collaborative action. For reasons of both breadth and depth then, public engagement should be viewed as a long-term affair.

Recommendations:

► *Build local capacity for public engagement at every stage.* If public engagement is a long-term process, then work must be constantly done to sustain and invigorate it. This means, for one thing, that at every juncture of a public engagement initiative, outside

support should be translated into local capacity. One aspect of this is to abide by the Alliance School movement's "iron rule": Never do for others what they can do for themselves. We have occasionally been involved in projects with partners who have not internalized this principle and done too much for local sites – doing for them what they can do for themselves, such as calling and organizing planning meetings, or offering local sites more funding than needed to jump-start their initiatives. These sites rarely seem to fulfill their promise, and generally end up doing less than those where more responsibility is given to local organizers and where they have combined local resources with outside funds and support.

Another aspect of planning for the long term is to train local players in planning, organizing, moderating and other skills necessary to replicate, sustain and develop public engagement in their communities. As mentioned earlier, a case in point concerns moderators and recorders, whose quality are key components of these community events. Recently, in addition to offering moderator and recorder training, we've also begun training local trainers so any future moderating needs can be handled from within the community. Similarly, we've begun offering workshops in framing issues so that themes not on our menu of prepared materials can be developed locally.

► *Follow through on community engagement efforts to maximize impact and create momentum.* Follow-up to community conversations must occur in a timely manner. The minimum this involves is a post-forum mailing to participants that:

- includes a report summarizing the overall forum (synthesizing notes and post-meeting surveys)
- informs participants if any of their deliberations have been disseminated to decision makers and if any responses have been made
- informs participants of opportunities for them to become more involved in school-community relations, such as upcoming school board, PTA and school council meetings.

Usually more is involved – as the case studies showed – and the extent of follow-up to community conversations always depends on several factors, including the outcomes of the session, the ambitions of the organizers and the resources and opportunities available.

► *Replenish local leadership.* It is important to replenish the leadership cadre as events unfold. There are always those who are so excited by a community conversation that they are willing to become involved in future efforts. It is important for the planning committee to absorb such new energy to recharge the initiative lest their enthusiasm wane.

► *Don't rush it.* While this section is devoted to the theme of translating deliberation into action and creating momentum for change, we also feel it is possible for the action agenda to be too powerfully at the fore of the initiative. Some organizers tend to rush into action out of an understandable concern that momentum will be lost. But it takes time to figure out how to move ahead together as a community. Thus, while it is important to capture momentum, it is also important not to force the issue. People may need to

visit and revisit an issue over time to figure out the best way to proceed.

A related point is that these efforts often seem to have a natural kind of ebb and flow to them, a rhythm reflecting the needs and vicissitudes of both the public and of organizers. The point shows up in the Manchester case study, in which the organizers put out a major effort, felt stymied by the official reaction, and had to regroup and figure out how to move ahead. The public undoubtedly has its own need to regroup and cannot be expected to engage issues in a deep way at every moment. While we don't claim to understand this dynamic in any detail, there seems to be something to the idea that engagement proceeds at varying degrees of intensity over time, and a natural ebb in the process should not be mistaken for failure.

Rules for **SUCCESS IN LARGE URBAN SETTINGS**

As with all things educational, major cities pose serious challenges for public engagement. The bureaucracy and politics can pose daunting obstacles, and the sheer size and diversity can be overwhelming.

For example, a community conversation project in New Orleans was organized by a group called the Metropolitan Area Committee, a community group created to address desegregation in the 1960s. The team planning the forum was comprised entirely of MAC staff members, and it did very little to recruit participants beyond the usual coterie of activists, simply sending out invitations and not following up with phone calls, for example. They chose to focus on the entire city of New Orleans rather than a specific neighborhood or school, and because they were a small group trying to engage an entire city around education, they needed to develop partnerships with community groups and schools and find creative methods of reaching into the many segments in the city. They did not, and unsurprisingly, only 20 people attended the forum, many of whom were regulars at education meetings.

An effort in Seattle also suffered from the constraints of trying to engage citizens in a large city without enough community partnership, planning and outreach. The project was initiated by the Customer Service department of the Seattle schools, who failed to create a broader sponsoring and organizing structure. The first sign of trouble arose when the original forum topic, “Teaching Methods,” was changed because the director of curriculum decided

he “didn’t want to discover that people wanted something different.” Outreach was minimal and, in the end, 30 people attended the event, and just as in New Orleans, they were the “usual suspects.”

Therefore, in addition to the rules and recommendations already discussed, special points apply.

Rule 1: In urban environments, think strategically about the question of scope

What are the boundaries of the community being engaged? This is a strategic question in all public engagement initiatives, but in large urban settings, the very success of the project hinges on it.

Small- and medium-sized communities can have successful district-wide forums although in our experience, local organizers who begin with a district-wide event tend to want to follow up with more localized conversations, often based around specific schools. (The Bridgeport case study offers an example). In large urban centers, such as New York or New Orleans, it seems almost impossible to have the kind of community engagement we have been concentrating on here on a district-wide basis, at least at the outset. Instead, it is best to narrow the scope to a level that “regular folks” can relate to. In New Orleans and Seattle, local organizers tried to pull off citywide forums and had disappointing results. In New York, forums were brought down to the level of a neighborhood, and the results were much better.

Recommendations:

► *Think of scope in terms of neighborhoods and the way local schools are organized.* It is highly unlikely that many of the 140 or so citizens who attended the Crown Heights forum would have gone to Manhattan for a citywide conversation on New York schools. They came to talk about their schools, where their children go and where they live.

In some districts, another way to think about scope is in terms of a high school and its feeder schools (the middle and elementary schools that feed into it). This can work well because parents and teachers from the lower levels are always interested in what's ahead, while those at the high school level are always dependent on what went before. This organizational scheme does not apply as well in districts where families choose their schools rather than progress through a given structure, but where it does apply it can offer a useful organizing scheme.

Rule 2: Very diverse communities may require special considerations

We are placing this discussion under urban issues, because diversity is classically an issue of large cities like New York and San Francisco. We recognize, however, that it increasingly applies to smaller cities and suburbs across the nation. (Yonkers and Jersey City are not major urban centers, but they are plenty diverse.)

Recommendations:

► *Effective strategies for recruiting participants and organizing forums may vary somewhat by local culture.* Without question, the most effective strategy for recruiting participants is personal networking,

where people connected to a particular group targeted to attend do the personal outreach. That said, some groups may need special attention in order to ensure they are represented.

An example is the Hispanic population, which, in some instances has been well represented (e.g., East New York and Culver City, CA.), while in others, despite Herculean efforts, the turnout has been disappointing (e.g., Bridgeport, San Jose). One answer is offered by Carolina Echeverria, who moderated the Spanish language discussion group in San Jose and who also works at a market research firm focusing on Hispanic populations nationwide. She suggested that educational advocacy is not as entrenched in Hispanic culture and beliefs as in some other communities. As such, she said, when approached to participate in a forum on education, Latino parents may be unsure if they have anything to contribute to the dialogue, or if their ideas will be well received. So it is important to have someone they know and trust invite them to the forum *who can convince them that the schools really want their input*, such as a school counselor or a teacher, *and* to reinforce this message with a community member, such as a neighbor who is planning to attend.

Another example is participation by students, who almost inevitably have a large and meaningful impact on these community conversations. We have sometimes found that, in urban environments especially, students are more likely to attend if invited in small groups rather than individually.

► *Multi-lingual forums require organizers to balance tradeoffs between group diversity and ease of*

communication. Multi-lingual forums present challenges, but we have not found them to be insurmountable. While we have not had funding to date to create video discussion starters in languages other than English (or to build in subtitles or dubbing) we have successfully included Spanish-speaking participants in a number of forums. One question that tends to arise is whether to organize discussion groups by language, as when San Jose organizers decided to have a Spanish-only group.

According to Echeverria, the moderator of that group, it's all right to have a separate Spanish-only group, because participants "know it's a language issue and not about isolating them from the rest of the community." In our experience, this arrangement works reasonably well. But it is still an issue that deserves case by case consideration, as well as further experimentation – for participants and of all linguistic backgrounds.

► *Location of the conversation can be an important factor in whether certain groups attend.* Community conversations should be in settings comfortable for groups who might be reluctant to participate otherwise. This is not, of course, solely an urban issue, but because of the greater variety of people, organizers should pay special attention to where they choose to hold the event. Some people, for example, may be uncomfortable entering a school building if their English is not very good, while others may attend only if the location is centrally located and accessible by foot or public transportation. Some cities have looked beyond school buildings and held conversations in hospitals, public housing projects and churches.

Rule 3: In large cities, expect more political and bureaucratic pressures and obstacles

In general, it is harder to get things done in big cities, where the bureaucracies are bigger and the politics more complex than in smaller settings. Navigating these can be tricky and generally calls for more intensive work establishing a strong leadership coalition, preferably with the cooperation of local school officials, if public engagement is to take root and bear fruit.

Recommendations:

► *Prior to "going public" build in plenty of lead time and establish a strong leadership team.* We've already spoken of the importance of building strong local leadership if public engagement is to take root and bear fruit. Because the obstacles can be greater in urban settings, where turf battles can be especially intense and where bureaucracies can be especially hard to crack, this point is even more important. It is therefore even more important than usual to invest enough time and energy to find the right partners and establish the right practices.

In big cities especially, this can be time-consuming and politically tricky, because there are more groups to deal with and often old baggage to discard concerning how those groups typically do business. For example, the best public engagement leadership teams are often composed of unusual bedfellows, who are typically on different sides of the fence when it comes to ideology or group interest. They need to find a common interest in bringing the public into the educational process if they are to work together, and it

can take time and many small steps to nurture this kind of relationship.

► *If local school officials are not on board to begin with, nurture cooperative relations with them at every step while protecting the integrity of the process.*

School officials tend to have an ambivalent relationship to public engagement and those pushing it, and these mixed emotions tend to be magnified in the highly charged and politicized urban environment. Superintendents, for instance, can see the potential that public engagement offers for their life's mission of educating children. On the other hand, public engagement implies shared responsibility, implying as well, at least to some extent, shared power. And that makes those who are held accountable vulnerable – hence the ambivalence.

School officials not on board, therefore, need to be brought along gradually and carefully, so that public engagement can have the greatest impact. A good first step is simply to include local administrators and officials as observers or participants. Often, in our experience, they transform from skeptical, silent and minimal partners to full-fledged enthusiasts once they've seen for themselves that the community really can be engaged in a positive manner. In Crown Heights, for example, at an after-the-forum planning session between community organizers and the local superintendent, one local organizer was so surprised by the superintendent's willingness to extend herself that he remarked, "I feel like I came here to ask for a date and ended up getting married!"



APPENDIX 1. COMPARISON OF SEVERAL APPROACHES TO PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION AND THE QUESTION OF “SOCIAL CAPITAL”

This paper has focused primarily on the *Public Conversations* approach to public engagement, with which we have the greatest familiarity. There are a number of other methods being applied around the country, and in this section, without attempting to be exhaustive, we wish to briefly discuss a sampling of them to give the reader a greater sense of scope of the field. Moreover, doing so raises theoretical and strategic questions worth putting on the table.

While each approach is, in some ways, unique, they all share a commitment to helping communities think, talk and work on education issues facing their local schools. And some have broader agendas as well, seeking to revitalize citizenship and community

beyond any immediate challenge that may be facing local schools. In fact, these efforts at public engagement in education may be organized according to the view of this variable of “community-building” (or, in the theoretical language of the day, “investment in social capital”). Some see community-building as a *prerequisite* to public engagement on education; others see it as a crucial *component and outgrowth* of public engagement, but not one that need occur prior to the public’s tackling of education issues; and still others see community-building as *secondary or superfluous*.

Table 1, below, and the subsequent discussion, elaborates.



Table 1
The Role of Community-Building in Various Approaches to Public Engagement

Role of Community-Building	Approach/Practitioner ³⁷	Basic Method
Community-building as prerequisite to engagement in education	Kettering Foundation Industrial Areas Foundation's Alliance Schools	Deliberative forums on community purposes prior to focusing on education issues Identify and train local leaders in community organizing prior to engaging parents and others in school reform activities
Community-building as component and outgrowth of engagement in education	Public Agenda/IEL <i>Public Conversations About the Public's Schools</i> Study Circles Phi Delta Kappa forums	Provide tools and support to existing local groups that build capacity for community dialogue, deliberation and collaboration on education issues.
Community-building as secondary or superfluous to engagement in education	Campaign for Fiscal Equity's public engagement campaign Nebraska's public engagement campaign on standards reform	Inform wider policy debate through deliberative community forums

³⁷ Again, this is not an exhaustive inventory of public engagement methods but a basic typology into which many of them fit, with a few choice examples. Sources that discuss various public engagement initiatives in education include, *Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change*, The Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998; and Suzanne Ashby, Cris Garza and Maggie Rivas, *Public Deliberation: A Tool for Connecting School Reform and Diversity*, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1998.

The Community First Perspective

Some practitioners of public engagement follow a strategy of community-building *before* trying to engage the public on specific education issues. For example, David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation in his book, *Is There a Public for the Public Schools?*, argues that direct attempts at engaging the public in education are misguided because:

...there may be no public waiting to be engaged. That is, there may be so few people supportive of the idea of public schools – so small a community for these inherently community institutions – that *school reform may need to be recast as community-building*. In other words, certain things may have to happen in our communities before we can see the improvement we want in our schools.³⁸

He elaborates that education is best viewed not as an end in itself but as a means to a *community's* ends. Thus, to Mathews, “What a school does makes little sense unless we know how its missions relate to the community’s educational goals and public purposes.” Moreover, “Identifying what is deeply valuable to people sets the stage for the obvious next question: How do we get what we want? And responding to that question leads to discussions of education.” What the Kettering approach to public engagement calls for, then, is public deliberation that allows a community to get to know itself and identify its priorities, so that

³⁸ *Is There a Public for the Public Schools*, Kettering Foundation Press, 1996, p.3, emphasis added.

dialogue about schools can have a meaningful context: “Keeping an eye on the community context helps connect what would otherwise be technical debates over school policies with people’s broader concerns.”³⁹

A different community-first approach is practiced by the Industrial Areas Foundation’s Alliance Schools, particularly in their impressive network in poor and working-class neighborhoods in Texas. This movement critiques traditional school reform as committing “the atomistic fallacy that fixing education means fixing schools,” and holds that true change only comes from “coordinat[ing] education within the school with the development within the community.”⁴⁰

Their method involves beginning with any glaring concrete community problem that might be of local concern, such as sewer repair, and moving from door-to-door, one-on-one community organizing to what are called “house meetings,” in which parents and others meet in small group sessions at people’s homes to discuss neighborhood and school concerns, along with public demonstrations, assemblies and programs aimed at improving local conditions.

A key element of this approach is that “organizers working with the Alliance School Initiative begin by teaching parents and educators the art of conversation.” As two practitioners explain:

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47. We are placing Kettering’s approach here based on Mathew’s book, which offers the fullest discussion. It should be noted, however, that Harris Sokolof of the University of Pennsylvania and others have applied Kettering principles to engaging the public on school reform more directly, without necessarily focusing on community development first.

⁴⁰ Dennis Shirley, *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform*, University of Texas, Austin, 1997, p.2. This section also draws from Cortes and Larkin, “Alliance School Concept” paper, Interfaith Education Fund, 1998 (draft).

In contrast, public schools like most other institutions are focused on *communication*. The emphasis on communication, which is the unilateral transmission from subject to object, is a reflection of the bureaucratic, hierarchical culture of the public education system. Conversation, which involves a reciprocal exchange of ideas, debate and compromise, is relational, and operates subject to subject.⁴¹

Community-Building as a Component and Outgrowth of Public Engagement⁴²

Practitioners who fall into this category agree that communities must be strengthened if public engagement is to fulfill its promise – if it is to be more than a just another project and become institutionally and culturally embedded in a community, taking hold in a way that makes a difference for students over time. But unlike the community first approach, this one assumes that, *if done right*, public engagement about specific public problems such as education can be undertaken without a prior period of major community-building activities. Moreover, engagement around school issues can be an effective means of building community, and the two processes can therefore go hand-in-hand rather than sequentially.

Study Circles, now established as an impressive national movement, are small, moderated groups that

meet on a regular basis to tackle a community issue. Their defining characteristics are:

- Groups of between 10 and 15 people who meet regularly over a period of weeks or months to “address a critical public issue in a democratic and collaborative way.”
- Facilitation by “a person who is there not to act as an expert on the issue, but to serve the group by keeping the discussions focused, helping the group consider a variety of views, and asking difficult questions.”
- Use of discussion materials that present a variety of viewpoints.
- Sessions that progress from personal experience with the issue at hand to a broader perspective and examination of a variety of approaches to action.⁴³

Typically, Study Circle initiatives involve many small groups meeting concurrently. Sometimes there are large assemblies at the beginning and end of a study circle series, the former to act as a kickoff event and the latter to share results and support and coordinate action.

This description begins to make clear how the very act of public deliberation on a specific problem such as improving education can become a community-building exercise, for the act and process of organizing such a program can create new entities and social capital that had not existed before. The deliberation and dialogue within the circles also spur

⁴¹ Cortes and Larkin (*ibid.*), pp. 1-2.

⁴² Because the Public Agenda/IEL *Public Conversations* work has already been discussed in detail, we'll focus here on other approaches that proceed *while* community development is occurring and that such dialogue can be a crucial component of that development.

⁴³ “Basic Information About the Study Circles Resource Center” (undated, Study Circles Resource Center, Pomfret, Connecticut).

the capacity of participants to think, speak and act as citizens.

Another approach to public engagement in this category is the Public Schools Forum project cosponsored by the professional educational advocacy group Phi Delta Kappa, the Center on Education Policy and the National PTA. Phi Delta Kappa chapters serve as local sponsors, often in conjunction with other community groups. “The basic assumption of the forums,” according to one of the national organizers, “is that important issues must be discussed among citizens at the local level. If our democracy is to function, we must dispel distrust among ourselves by talking to one another face to face.” The forums are designed primarily to inform the local and national policy debate through community forums that focus on three questions:

1. What are the purposes of the public schools?
2. How effective are the public schools in achieving those purposes?
3. What changes are necessary to make the public schools as effective as we want them to be?⁴⁴

Community-Building Not on the Agenda

Public engagement always has a policy dimension, sometimes implicitly, often explicitly. It concerns either an education issue that has policy implications (student achievement, the purposes of education, dealing with diversity, etc.), or it is about a policy that is meant to address such an issue (academic

standards, zero tolerance, new technology, and so on).

Some practitioners of public engagement are concerned with policy very directly, their aim being to gain public input on a policy debate, and they may pay little or no attention to community-building. This is probably most common with respect to statewide or national policies that have implications for individual communities but are rooted in larger political arenas. The Nebraska public engagement campaign discussed in Section I is an example.

The Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) is another. CFE is a nonprofit coalition of New York City parent organizations, community school boards, concerned citizens and advocacy groups challenging the way New York State finances public schools. It wants to ensure adequate resources and the opportunity for a sound basic education for all students in New York City in particular, but also throughout the state, and its lawsuit against the state began in October 1999.

In agreeing to hear the case, the court gave a provisional definition of a “sound basic education” and asked the group to come back with recommendations for refinements. Although the court did not mandate that CFE go to the public with this charge, the organization felt that any reform resulting from the lawsuit ought to be grounded in ideas that the citizens of New York State would find acceptable, or else the exercise is liable to be a futile one. That is, CFE could win the legal battle, but without the public on board could lose the education war.

⁴⁴ Jack Jennings, “An Experiment in Democracy,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 1997. See also Rose and Rapp’s article, “The Future of the Public Schools” in the same issue.



The traditional approach here would have been public relations – e.g., a media campaign to sell the public on CFE's pre-decided ideas. Instead, CFE chose to invest in a series of community forums during which residents, invited by CFE or local organizers or attending as a result of announcements in the local press, discussed the pros and cons of various ways to finance schools and reform education.⁴⁵

Again, this brief overview of organizations working on public engagement strategies is not meant to be exhaustive, but simply to give the reader a feel for some of the efforts being employed across the nation to help communities engage their citizenry on behalf of better schools. One question the comparison raises is how significant *is* this variable of community-building/social capital that divides these various approaches? For example, does it help us better understand which methods are most appropriate to which communities?

Social Capital and Public Engagement Strategies

Social capital refers to "...features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives."⁴⁶ The concept includes the notion of "intermediary associations" such as families, houses of worship, sports leagues, clubs, associations and

even restaurants that become places where people meet regularly and work out their problems together.

So far we've seen that:

- 1) some approaches invest in social capital *prior* to engaging the public on education,
- 2) some view social capital as a crucial *component and outgrowth* of public engagement on education, while
- 3) still others view the creation of local social capital as *beside the point*.

Braatz and Putnam, in their study of social capital and school reform, make a related point: Some school reform strategies, they contend, begin by creating "*new social capital*" while others "*exploit existing social capital*." These two categories correspond to points 1 and 2, above: some approaches to public engagement, they are saying, concern themselves with building the community up *before* they feel it is possible to effectively engage the community on behalf of school improvement (point 1). Others make use of *existing* social capital to get the job done, leveraging existing networks, groups, institutions, norms, trust, etc. toward engagement with the schools (point 2).⁴⁷

⁴⁵Public Agenda worked with CFE on many of these events, helping to translate their ideas into forum-friendly form and either provide nonpartisan moderators or training local moderators to handle the discussions in a nonpartisan fashion. For more information on CFE's work, contact the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, 6 E. 43rd Street, New York, NY 10017.

⁴⁶Robert Putnam, "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America," *The American Prospect*, Winter 1996. An early application of the concept in education may be found in J.S. Coleman and T. Hoffer, *Public And Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities*, New York, Basic Books, 1987.

⁴⁷They ignore our third category, those for whom the development of local community social capital is besides the point. Also, in contrast to our analysis, Braatz and Putnam cite the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation's "Alinsky-style work" as an example of efforts that exploit *existing* social capital rather than creating new capital prior to engaging the public on school issues. And they are right that the IAF work relies heavily on existing religious institutions and networks, drawing on them to engage the community in school reform. But an approach that advocates a year or two of door-to-door one-to-one conversations between organizers and residents, the identifying and training local leaders, and the tackling of concrete, in-your-face issues like sewage, and all of this prior to engagement on education, is at least in the category of creating "new" social capital before engaging the public on education.

Braatz and Putnam end their paper by suggesting that those who are focusing on community first may be on track: “[R]evitalizing American civic engagement may be a prerequisite for revitalizing American education.” They argue that in weak communities especially, with little in the way of networks of trust and solidarity on which to draw, it may be necessary to invest in social capital first.

A counter-argument is that even in communities with little social capital to draw on, engaging the public on education may be not only be possible, it may be a good way to strengthen the community more generally. In other words, you can both exploit existing social capital to *begin* to engage the public (e.g., work with local groups and networks) *and* you can create social capital “as you go.” For one of the ways communities are enriched and strengthened is by focusing on issues that people care about and can work together on with tangible results. School improvement fits the bill on each count. People care about it; it’s a natural for collaboration within and among existing community networks and institutions; and schools are right there where people can see them and the impact they’re having.

Practitioners in this build-social-capital-as-you-go category proceed on the assumption that every community has some measure of social capital to draw on, or people would be living in complete social chaos.⁴⁸ This perspective further assumes that with

the right support-training, materials, perhaps some seed money-it is almost always possible to draw on local resources to begin to engage the public in their local schools. In other words, even a neighborhood that is poor in resources and beset by formidable social problems will have *some* social resources that can be drawn upon – religious institutions, perhaps, or community-based organizations, or, in some instances, the school system itself, as well as informal networks. And with the proper support, these can be leveraged to begin to engage the public more fully and effectively in their local schools, and help vitalize the community more generally.

If these practitioners turn out to be correct it would probably be for the best, as far as schools are concerned, for the simple reason that reform cannot wait. The need for school improvement is in many cases so pressing, school policies are changing so rapidly, and the community’s involvement in that change is so crucial, that community engagement cannot wait for something else to happen first, it must happen now. The very fate of public schools as we know them hangs in the balance of achieving results in poorly performing and mediocre schools. Parents cannot be asked to wait patiently while these schools turn around. If change is slow in coming, they will surely look for alternatives and would be irresponsible if they did not. We’ve arrived at the point where the shadow of doubt looms larger with each passing year over the very existence of the common school that helps hold citizens together in our highly individualistic society.

On the other hand, it could be the case that even if a measure of successful public engagement is possible

⁴⁸ There’s actually quite a bit of debate right now about the state of America’s reservoir of social capital. (See, e.g., Everett Ladd’s “Contrary to Cynical Conventional Wisdom, US citizens Are Not ‘Bowling Alone,’” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 1, 1999.) Be that as it may, it is probably fair to say that some communities have more ample networks of trust and cooperation than others, and this is the relevant point here.

in communities where social capital is in weak supply, more profound results can be achieved by investing in community-building first. From this standpoint, even if school reform is needed sooner rather than later, it is nevertheless wise to build a solid foundation by strengthening community first, because the end results will be that much more substantial.

A third possibility is to combine the two approaches, engaging citizens on education issues at the same time as more basic community organizing and development is taking place. Perhaps there are some

communities and situation where such an ambitious program is warranted.

Comparing Concrete Methods and Strategies

Putting theoretical questions aside, how do these approaches compare on the level of practical methods? Table 2 (next two pages) highlights the key similarities and differences between the five approaches introduced in this section, and the *Public Conversations* approach discussed in the text.



Table 2: Comparisons of *Public Conversations* with Five Other Approaches to Public Engagement in Education

Approach	Methods	Contrasts with <i>Public Conversations</i>
Kettering Foundation Forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Creates tools for communities to use in deliberative forums, including several issue guides on improving schools, but does not offer direct technical assistance. * Focuses on building community before addressing education issues. 	<p><i>How Public Conversations are similar:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Deliberative public forums with choice framework and nonpartisan moderators. <p><i>How Public Conversations are different:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Tackles education issues directly, without prior phase of deliberation on community purposes. * Offers technical assistance. * Uses video discussion starters covering various ed. issues.
Industrial Areas Foundations Alliance Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Adapts political organizing philosophy and techniques of Saul Alinsky to education in poor and working class communities. * Commits organizers to intensive work identifying and training local leaders in political organizing and gradually building a constituency for change. * Seeks to foster a "culture of conversation" and to train local leaders in organizing skills prior to engaging parents and other community members in school reform activities. 	<p><i>Similarities:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Commitment to "culture of conversation." <p><i>Differences:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Assumes can hold effective community conversations on education without prior focus on community-building * Uses video discussion starters covering various ed. issues.
Study Circles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Provides tools and support for local groups to create small, moderated study groups that meet several times to create common understanding and plan action. * Has created discussion materials on some school issues. 	<p><i>Similarities:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Deliberative community dialogue with choice frameworks and nonpartisan moderators. * Sometimes incorporate small group meetings over time as follow-up to community conversations. <p><i>Differences:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * <i>Public Conversations</i> generally utilize large, "town meeting" format with small discussion groups, although Study Circles sometimes use larger forums to kick-off and sum-up. * Uses video discussion starters covering various ed. issues.

(Table continues on next page)

<p>Phi Delta Kappan Forums</p>	<p>* Provides tools and support to local groups for community dialogue on three questions: What are the purposes of education? How well are the schools doing? What should be done to improve schools?</p>	<p><i>Similarities:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Deliberative forums with diverse participants and nonpartisan moderators. <p><i>Differences:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * <i>Public Conversations</i> places more emphasis on building local capacity (training moderators, consulting on organizational infrastructure). * Multiple discussion frameworks, rather than one, and more customization by community. * Use of choice-work and video discussion starters.
<p>Campaign for Fiscal Equity</p>	<p>* Inform wider policy debate in New York State on school funding and reform through deliberative community forums. * Public engagement a complement to funding equity court case.</p>	<p><i>Similarities:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Deliberative forums with nonpartisan moderators. <p><i>Differences:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * More emphasis on building local capacity and ensuring participation by diverse stakeholders and general community members. * More consistent use of choice-work approach (CFE sometimes employs it). * Not necessarily tied to ongoing litigation. * Video discussion starters on various topics, customized by community rather than by development of larger campaign. * Focuses on dialogue/collaboration among broad cross-section and average citizens rather than among traditional interest groups

The similarities and differences are not meant to connote pros or cons (although in some cases we may see it that way) but rather to sharpen the definition of a variety of approaches and to familiarize readers with the range of concrete methods being employed to engage the public in education reform. For example, The Campaign for Fiscal Equity sees connecting public engagement to pending legislation as an advantage, lending an urgency and import to the proceedings – and for situations where such legislation is pending, they may be right. The Alliance Schools methods and those of *Public Conversations* are different enough that one may be more appropriate in one situation while under different circumstances the other may work better, and in yet another case they may work well in combination. Future research and continued work in the field should help to clarify these questions.

APPENDIX 2. PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE PUBLIC'S SCHOOLS: SUPPLEMENTARY DOCUMENTS

SAMPLE DISCUSSION FRAMEWORK

As an example of a “choice framework,” what follows is the text of the Purposes of Education video:

Purposes of Education: What Should the First Priority of the Public Schools Be?

Most people would probably agree it is important for America's public schools to pay attention to each of the following purposes of education:

- *Preparing students for success in the job market.*
- *Widening students' horizons and helping them develop a love of learning.*
- *Educating students to be responsible citizens.*

While most schools probably pay some attention to each of these purposes, it is also the case that schools can't be expected to do everything equally well. Effective schools must set priorities in how they allocate resources, what they look for when hiring teachers, and how they construct curriculum.

To help you and your neighbors sort out what is most important to you about the purposes of education, we've created a scenario that describes three different school boards. Which school board would you prefer in your own community, and why?

School Board A's first priority is preparing students for success in the job market

School Board A has decided that the district's greatest priority is to prepare each student to be successful in the job market.

Toward this end, the district emphasizes the academic basics, computer literacy, applying course work to real-world situations and good work habits. Rigorous technical training is offered to those students who are not likely to go on to college. Job fairs, job internships, and career counseling are a significant part of the curriculum for all students.

Those who like this approach often say:

Young people need to be prepared to make it in the real world when they're in school or they'll be lost when they get out.

School Board B's first priority is widening students' horizons and helping them develop a love of learning

School Board B has decided that the district's greatest priority is providing students with rich and challenging educational experiences and a broad base of knowledge in order to expand their horizons and help them develop a love of learning.

Toward this end, the district emphasizes following the academic basics with in-depth course work in literature, science, math, history, and the arts. Students are also helped to find and pursue those

areas of learning in which they have special interests and gifts. A high value is placed on creativity, independent thinking and effectively expressing ideas.

Those who like this approach often say:

If schools don't emphasize a challenging academic curriculum and rich cultural experiences, most students will never have a chance to experience them and their lives will be limited as a result.

School Board C's first priority is to educate students to be responsible and capable citizens

School Board C has decided that the district's greatest priority is teaching students to be responsible and capable citizens, with the knowledge, values and skills to contribute to the life of their community and their country.

In addition to teaching the academic basics, the district places special emphasis on course work that helps students appreciate both cultural differences *and* the common history and values that all Americans share. Also, civics classes stress the importance of voting and citizenship. Finally, the district encourages all students to do some form of voluntary community service during their school careers.

Those who like this approach often say:

The public schools are the place where all different kinds of kids can learn to get along, establish the habits of responsible citizenship, and learn to appreciate both their differences and their commonalities.

SAMPLE PRESS CLIPS