Reasons for Hope

Voices for Change

A Report of the Annenberg Institute on Public Engagement for Public Education

from the Interim Director

David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation has raised the question, Is there a "public" for public schools? In his 1996 book of that title, Mathews explores whether Americans are committed to public education and concludes that the historic accord between the citizenry and its public schools is seriously eroding. Many people are deeply concerned about the quality of our children's education and find it difficult to be hopeful about its future.

Over the past fifteen years, since publication of *A Nation at Risk*, calls for reform in public education have led to better preparation of teachers, more stringent graduation requirements, clearer standards and tougher testing. Yet the ultimate goal of improved schooling and student achievement has remained elusive. Schools working alone have not been able to achieve that goal; the active support of the public appears to be crucial to any long-term improvement in public education.

As this report attests, there is a public for public schools. More and more Americans are now acting upon their concerns about our public education system. *Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change* offers a promising look at initiatives that have sprung up across the country to build citizen involvement and support for school change. Whether mobilized and sustained by educators or by parents and community leaders, Americans are reinvesting in their schools and building broad collaborations to find the answers to the critical issues plaguing education reform in this country.

The Institute is taking a first step to promote an understanding of public engagement through an initial analysis of information on 174 initiatives and through a rich and provocative collection of stories from some dozen of those sites. A resource center on the Institute's web site (www.aisr.brown.edu) will make available to educators, parents, and the public the continuing work that this study has begun. We welcome your ideas and comments and encourage you to share with us your own stories of public engagement.

Ramón Cortines
Interim Director
Annenberg Institute for School Reform

ANNENBERG INSTITUTE for SCHOOL REFORM

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Foreword

In ancient Greece, major decisions were made through public dialogue carried on in a public space. Without question, society today is more complicated than it was then. Yet engaging in public dialogue about public issues – particularly about education – provides the same opportunities for consensus and enlightened decision making that guided ancient Greeks three thousand years ago. And, as members of an intellectual community, our obligation to discuss and think about public issues is even greater.

For the past eighteen months, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform has undertaken a study of the ways in which schools, parents, and the public are organizing themselves to revitalize public education across the country. This report, *Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change*, summarizes what we learned.

The Annenberg Institute is just one of many campus organizations at Brown that are contributing to the dialogue on American public education. The work of all of these organizations – including the Northeast Regional Lab at Brown, the Education Department, the Institute for Elementary and Secondary Education, the Swearer Center for Public Service, and the Taubman Center for Public Policy – has made public education an important issue on our campus and has provided our faculty and students with opportunities to take leadership positions in education in Rhode Island, in New England, and throughout the nation.

Because of these programs and institutes, Brown has truly become one of the centers of public discussion on education. Our faculty, researchers, writers, and students are engaged in this public dialogue. Their work has also demonstrated an essential fact about Brown University: that although Brown is a private institution, it is a private institution with a public purpose. And I can think of no issue more important to the American public today than the state of our public schools.

Four years ago Ambassador Walter Annenberg issued his Challenge to the Nation and funded the Annenberg Institute at Brown to oversee the reform work and research inspired by his unprecedented gift. This report exemplifies Ambassador Annenberg's generosity and commitment to public education. There are lessons here that can serve all of us in our own respective communities.

E. Gordon Gee
President
Brown University
Chairman
Board of Overseers,
Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Preface

Public schools are crucial to the sustained vitality of American democracy. And a supportive and involved public is crucial to the survival of public schools.

These two beliefs are central to the work of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. They also define the premise under which the Institute began an inquiry into the work of educators, parents, and citizens, all across the nation, who seek to use the tools of public engagement to re-establish the connections between Americans and their schools.

Originally created in 1993 with funding from private donors, the Institute crafted a mission – to promote and advocate the serious redesign of American schooling – that was extended and deepened by a gift from publisher and philanthropist Walter H. Annenberg as part of his Challenge to America. In honor of that gift, the Institute now bears his name.

Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change: A Report of the Annenberg Institute on Public Engagement for Public Education is based on an eighteen-month effort to identify, map, and describe a variety of public engagement projects across America. In creating this report, staff from the Annenberg Institute, in partnership with Millennium Communications

Group, Inc., of Washington, DC, have gathered stories and experiences from people and projects in hundreds of local schools and communities. We offer a first look at how local civic, business, and school initiatives across the country are developing the skills necessary to involve their communities in the work of improving public education. The rich and varied experiences we found help define and shape a new understanding about engagement – why it's happening, what it's accomplishing, and what promise it holds for the future of public education.

This study chronicles how people in communities and schools are proving that a more diverse constituency can empower and sustain education reform. It points to the increasing capacity of communities to listen and learn together as they deal with the difficult decisions of school improvement. It demonstrates that communities are drawing new voices into the conversation about schools, purposefully building broad support for initiatives such as standards implementation, increased bond funding, or increased professional development time.

This report has also been written to bring support and validation to the practitioners of engagement at the local level, who face substantial challenges and who often receive little attention. Ultimately, their successes will bring new ideas and perspectives to those individuals and institutions who either shape school improvement initiatives or interpret the results of those initiatives to a nation eager for encouragement and real results.

The places that we studied have both inspired us and provided valuable lessons for the future. What we found in our research were people – both in schools and the community – who were successfully engaging each other with confidence and resiliency, working for positive school change. For anyone concerned with the future of public education, their efforts offer reason for hope.

Jeffrey S. Kimpton
Director of Public Engagement
Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Marcia K. Sharp
Principal
Millennium Communications Group, Inc.

Chapter 1

A Quiet Revolution

There is a quiet revolution taking place in public education, the beginning of a fundamental shift in the actions of Americans on behalf of their children and with their schools. It signals a change in the notions and structures of power in education. It comes from a vital interaction among people and institutions. It is called public engagement.

Engaging citizens in shaping the institutions that serve them is, of course, not new. Its roots stretch back to the foundations of our system of democracy. It is well developed in the movements that go by such names as community revitalization, civic engagement, community organizing, and – more recently – social-capital formation, community dialogue, and institutional transformation.

What *is* new is the increasing use of engagement techniques for public education. While there have always been some schools and communities that have engaged the public – or at least parents – effectively, today the idea of public engagement is being discussed, developed, and put into practice on a significant scale.

The fundamental purpose of any public engagement initiative is to channel a community's concern, apathy, or anger into informed and constructive action. It calls upon citizens to reinvest in their public institutions – not only their money, but their time, energy, and commitment as well. Three broad characteristics are common to this widely used strategy for achieving social change. The first is *inclusiveness:* Public engagement actively and intentionally seeks to involve citizens from all segments of a community. The second is a *focus on change:* Public engagement works for changes that will improve the life of the local community. And the third is *consensus:* Public engagement builds, informs, and deepens local conversations around issues with the aim of developing broad support for action. Together, these characteristics help communities develop the capacity to tackle tough issues and make tough choices.

Pollster's Question:
Here are some issues now being discussed in Washington. For each one, please tell me whether you think it should be the top priority for Congress and the President to deal with in 1997, a high priority, a low priority, or not a priority at all.

Percent of Respondents Saying "Top" or "High" Priority

95% Education
93% Crime
88% Health Care

Source: The Gallup Poll, February 11, 1997.

Engagement: two-way communication

As educators, parents and community members engage each other in the process of improving schools, there's a subtle shift in the language and activities of communication between education and community stakeholders. This shift is sometimes called "two-way communication." As engagement initiatives mature, communication and public relations strategies are enhanced by a combination of media and personal interactions. These deeper and more frequent personal interactions increase both the quantity and quality of media information, as well as the desire for additional interaction between community members, parents, or educators.

For instance a public hearing, held once or twice with limited public input may be turned into a series of small community conversations in schools and homes. The consensus of those local conversations might prompt a newsletter or flyer that is shared with all parents and the community. There's a deliberate move toward inclusiveness that blends many ways of reaching school consumers, from house meetings or neighborhood canvassing to focus groups organized by school, neighborhood, or with different groups, such as local business owners. As new issues are addressed, the process of sharing and talking with the many groups of people with a stake in education quality becomes a valuable – and renewable – strategic asset for schools and communities.

As schools and communities move from communication to **engagement**

communicate to	**deliberate with**
public hearing	**community conversation**
talk to, tell	**talk with, share**
information out	**information around**
seeking to establish/ protect turf	**seeking and finding common ground**
authority	**responsibility**
influencing the like-minded	**understanding those *not* like-minded**
top down	**bottom up**
establishing a hierarchy for decision making	**building a network of stakeholders**
goals/strategic plan	**values/vision**
products	**process**
public relations	**public engagement**

Public Engagement for Public Education

Public engagement for public education sits squarely in the context of this strategy for civic reinvestment. While sometimes self-styled as "public engagement," these initiatives in education are as likely to be labeled public conversation, parent involvement, school/community partnerships, citizen action, neighborhood improvement, community organizing, or even standards setting and implementation. A specific initiative may have its impetus in the school system or in the community. But regardless of where it begins, public engagement for public education is a purposeful effort to build a collaborative constituency for change and improvement in schools.

Public engagement is… involving community residents in thinking, debating, and talking about whatever pressing issues there are – sometimes broader issues like tracking, second-language education, desegregation, but usually about what's going on in the schools day to day.

Barbara Gross
Mothers on the Move
Bronx, NY

The concept of engagement is particularly compelling in the arena of public education, for two reasons. First, schools – as public, or "common," institutions – present a ready emblem of democracy and public life. They command the attention of concerned citizens as few other institutions do. Second, engagement initiatives can stir the resonance of community conversation – obtaining the participation and buying the time – that will help efforts to improve schools to move forward.

Engagement initiatives for public education have sprung up in every kind of community – urban, suburban, and rural; large and small; diverse and homogeneous. The work of engagement has achieved many tangible goals and produced a number of successful strategies. Many groups have increased involvement among parents. Some have proposed or helped pass bond initiatives and reform legislation, while others have devised new frameworks for accountability. A few can already point to substantially improved student performance. Many have increased the levels of trust and broadened the dialogue among community constituents. All are passionate about the importance of this work and confident of its power to produce results.

Yet, as a formal and serious strategy for school change, engagement initiatives have received little assessment or attention. This inquiry confirms that they deserve both.

The Common Goals of Engaging for School Reform

The projects described in this report are highly diverse, as the stories and analysis in the next chapter make clear. Many of them are very new, with results that are more readily "felt" than documented. Looked at together, however, they suggest some common areas of focus on school improvement.

1. Improving teaching and learning

Superintendents and principals are developing new ways to build community support for teachers who can pioneer new curriculum ideas and new teaching methods. Community and school leaders are involving the public in formulating new standards for student achievement. Educators, parents, and community members are learning to think together about what good schools and good work should look like and what well-educated students should know and be able to do.

2. Bringing more people to the table.

Community organizing and advocacy projects are training parents about their rights in schools and how to exercise them. Civic and business coalitions are thinking through how to draw constituencies other than educators and parents into the conversation about schools – for example, senior citizens, small business owners, or citizens without school-age children. Schools are learning to listen differently and are reaching out more effectively to stakeholders, particularly to those

who have felt excluded or unwelcome for reasons of race, class, culture, or other aspects of "difference."

3. Equipping communities to make tough decisions. Business and community groups are sponsoring ongoing conversations around "what we want for our community," to help local citizens prepare themselves to make the tough decisions of today's school environment – about standards, spending, values, accountability, and equity. They are developing initiatives to engage voters, legislators, and the media in discussions of complex testing and assessment issues. Schools and school districts are launching parent institutes to enable parents to understand the same issues. Newspapers and broadcast outlets are mounting civic journalism projects to bring in-depth information on local issues to a wide range of citizens.

Few engagement efforts studied for this project have yet achieved an environment in which the schools and their community routinely and intentionally deliberate and decide together on what kind of schooling they want for their children. But pieces of that environment are being created or strengthened every day in an increasing number of communities across the country. Their dynamic vitality has energized this research.

The Annenberg Inquiry into Public Engagement for Public Education

The work on this inquiry began with a series of questions. Is public engagement an important element in school reform? If so, why? Is it "real" – a definitive new trend – or is it a fuzzy and faddish notion, soon to fade from popularity? How and where do schools and communities "engage"? What indicators demonstrate success? Can public engagement lead to higher student achievement as well as healthier communities?

To begin to answer these questions, the Institute drew up a preliminary list of more than 250 sites with active public engagement initiatives. These were solicited from a variety of sources, including recommendations from the Institute's public engagement advisory board (see Acknowledgments) and from organizations affiliated with the Institute and its research partner on this project, Millennium Communications Group. With additional suggestions from people in one site pointing to others they knew of and from responses to notices placed by the Institute in education publications, the list grew to nearly 400. From these, the study team selected 174 for telephone interviews over a twelve-month period using an interview protocol developed by the team. Members of the team made one- to three-day visits to 50 sites that appeared to represent best experiences. And, finally, the Institute convened groups from nearly 30 sites for two days of working meetings in Providence. The findings reported here are derived from the interviews, site visits, and deliberations of the working groups, as well as from studies of several initiatives that have received significant media attention but were not visited.

Public engagement is… involving citizens of the community in addressing issues that affect the quality of their lives, helping them understand what the issues are, and helping them to build the capacity to make good decisions. It's what democracy is all about.

Otis Johnson
Chatham–Savannah
Youth Futures Authority

It is important to note that the 174 sites on which this report is based do not represent a statistical sampling of the universe of public engagement for public education. Indeed, such a rigorous sampling would be impossible to obtain, since there is no method of determining all of the schools and communities that are doing this work and since many initiatives do not identify themselves as doing "public engagement." Rather, the sites selected for study – and, in particular, the 50 sites that were visited – were chosen to reveal a cross-section of public engagement activi-

ties and to shed light on those that were demonstrating some success. As the project continues, the compilation of an increasingly comprehensive list of public engagement activities will be ongoing (see Appendix B).

Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change: A Report of the Annenberg Institute on Public Engagement for Public Education maps new territory, providing an overview of a growing phenomenon in the world of education and education reform. It explores the conditions in current American life that are shaping education-related public engagement. It describes who is organizing these efforts and how they work. It offers findings gleaned from the communities and schools doing this work and sets out the challenges they face in the future. Finally, it asks for new leadership from the many forces that must work together for the future of public education.

Throughout chapter 2 are individual stories and textual vignettes of engagement initiatives that illustrate the variety of people and the range of activities that are building citizen involvement and support for school change. None of these stories describes the ideal public engagement effort; they have been selected with an eye to revealing the wide range of participants, activities, and goals of public engagement efforts across the country.

Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change offers an important benchmark against which future developments in public engagement for public education can be measured. The communities using this tool for change believe that it has enormous potential to move them further along the road of reform, to restore the mutual trust and shared responsibility that must exist between schools and their communities, and to promote greater student and school achievement. Their commitment offers ample testimony to the powerful promise of public engagement to improve public schools.


Team Presentation - 20 Min
Following questions - facilitators
Team responds
Open q+a
each team: ~ 35 Mins

Chapter 2

Public Engagement Today

As the Institute began its inquiry into public engagement as an important element for school reform, four questions lay at the heart of its effort to map initiatives across the country:

- What trends and conditions underlie public engagement today?
- Who is driving the work of public engagement?
- What kinds of public engagement efforts are there?
- What outcomes does public engagement seek?

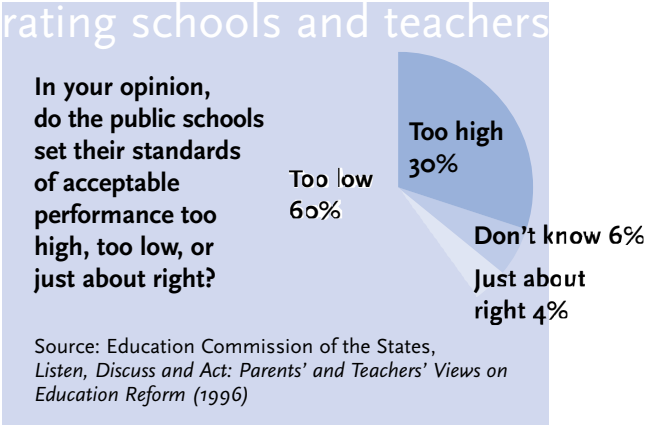
The answers to these questions have been drawn from the diverse examples of local, regional, and statewide efforts collected for this research.

What trends and conditions underlie public engagement today?

Public attention has been focused on education reform for more than fifteen years. Concern over that time has not faded but grown steadily, a rare phenomenon in American public opinion. The use of public engagement as a strategy for education reform suggests that many Americans are no longer content to delegate the matters of education to education professionals or elected officials. Repeatedly in the sites that were visited or the interviews that were held, the answers to the questions *Why engagement? Why now?* revealed critical factors pushing schools and communities to think differently about their common work.

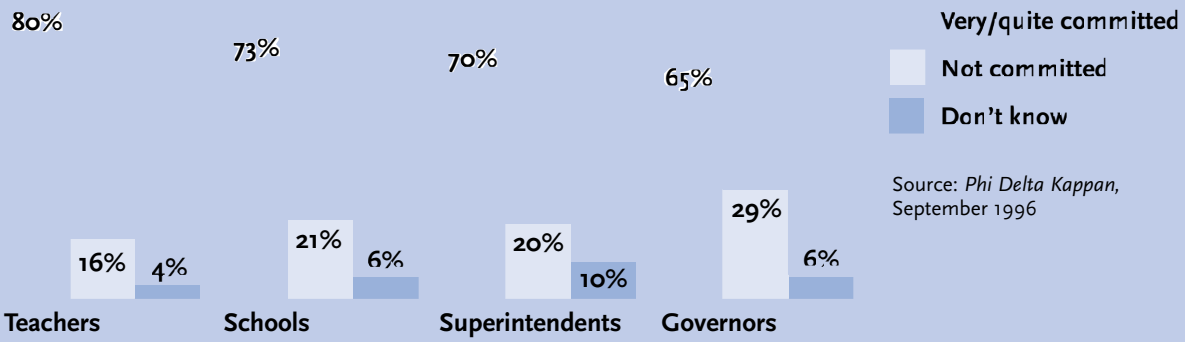
The public is growing impatient with the pace of education reform.

The public is not convinced that schools, or student achievement, have significantly improved. An increasing number of parents are indicating their lack of confidence in local schools by voting with their feet, opting



Source: Education Commission of the States, *Listen, Discuss and Act: Parents' and Teachers' Views on Education Reform (1996)*

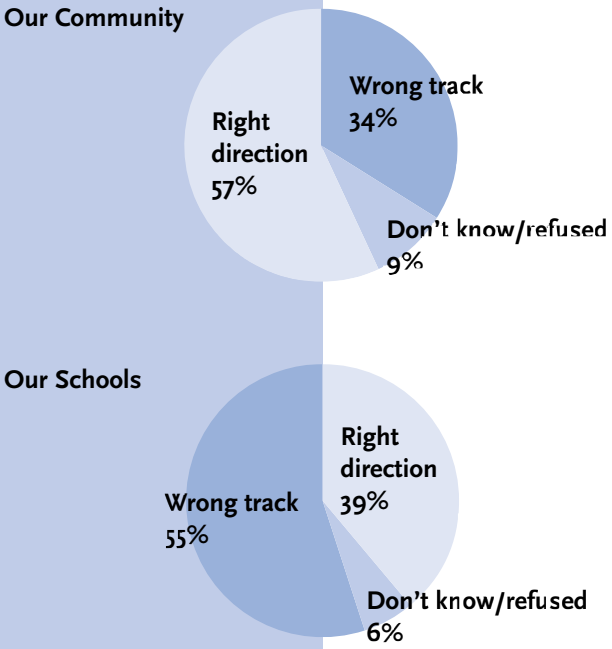
How parents rate commitment to improving public education



Source: *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1996

Parents rate schools and teachers

Are things in your community and in your schools going in the right direction or have they gotten off on the wrong track?



Source: Education Commission of the States, *Listen, Discuss and Act: Parents' and Teachers' Views on Education Reform (1996)*

for private schools, vouchers, or home schooling. In some places, support for public education has worn perilously thin, and along with it the widely held assumption that public schools should serve all children.

The media are focusing public attention on schools.
The public's perception of schools is being shaped by intense media coverage of education. By raising this issue to unprecedented levels of public interest, the media have often fostered a siege mentality on the part of schools and education professionals, who have received much of the blame for failing schools.

Schools are recognizing that they need public support for reform.
Schools working alone have been hardpressed to bring about the changes needed in education. Even the most proven programs may fail if the public does not understand their purposes or has not been involved in shaping them. Those who work in schools are recognizing that parents and the public must become part of the solution – for the long haul.

There's a belief that communities can – and should – solve local problems.
An increasing number of civic dialogue and local revitalization projects are working to reconnect people and communities. Public education is seen by many as a critical determinant of community vitality, and many are beginning to use schools as a vehicle for re-envisioning the future of their communities.

the media

Parents:

rely on local media for most useful information about their community's schools	22%
rely on personal observations and conversations	72%

Educators:

Percent agreeing there is "a lot/some truth" to these statements about the media –

cover education news according to what sells	91%
report low achievement without context to fairly evaluate	89%
unfairly dwell on conflict and failure	86%
use quotes or statistics out of context	79%
cause much of the decline in public confidence	76%

The Public:

Percent agreeing these statements are "very/somewhat close" to their view about the local media –

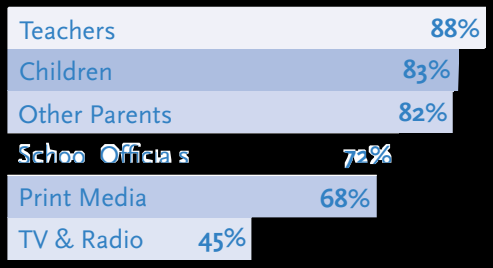
valuable public service, keep watchful eye on schools	71%
usually cover important issues	77%
usually do a good job explaining issues to me	69%

"If you had to choose the one thing happening in your community you are most interested in knowing about, which of the following would you choose?"

	Parents	Non-parents
Public Schools	65%	31%
Crime	25%	40%
Local Economy	11%	26%

Source: Public Agenda, *Good News, Bad News: What People Really Think About The Education Press (1997)*

Who parents rely on heavily or somewhat heavily as sources of information about education issues



Source: Education Commission of the States, *Listen, Discuss and Act: Parents' and Teachers' Views on Education Reform (1996)*

Public Engagement Today

Public Engagement:

A purposeful effort, starting in either the school system or the community, to build a collaborative constituency for change and improvement in schools.

Who Starts/Sustains Public Engagement

- Parents
- Civic and Business People
- Educators
- Elected Officials
- Coalitions and Networks

Common Project Types

- Parent Participation
- Community/ Parent Organizing
- Standards Development and Implementation
- Strategic Planning/ Community Visioning
- Public Conversation and Deliberation
- Governance and Shared Decision Making
- Legislation and Policy Development

Shared Characteristics of Engagement Initiatives

- Characterized by inclusive, in-depth dialogue
- Dedicated to real improvement in schools
- Committed to creating dynamic partnerships
- Working to find common ground
- Based on candor and mutual trust

The Outcomes of Public Engagement

- Improved learning and teaching
- Greater community trust in schools
- Deeper parent/community involvement
- Increased resources
- More supportive legislative policy framework
- Responsible media participation

The Cycle of Engagement

- Coming together: starting conversation and dialogue; building trust and safe spaces
- Moving forward: converting dialogue into concern-driven activity; reaching out beyond the core group
- Sustaining momentum: building structures; developing and sustaining leadership; assessing and improving programs

The historically disenfranchised are willing to take action because others have not.

Many parents and concerned community members, especially in the rural and urban areas where many of America's poorest families live, are demanding changes in public institutions that are not serving their needs. The use of public engagement is a matter of survival for these communities and their children, who have serious questions about America's willingness to provide quality education for all children, regardless of race, class, culture, ethnicity, or income level. In some of America's most challenged learning environments, parents and others are working to improve schools and to confront the inequities in resources – human, financial, and physical – that stand as real barriers to school improvement and their children's achievement.

With the erosion of unquestioning trust in the public education system – what was almost an unwritten contractual agreement between schools and communities – people in town halls, faculty lunchrooms, local business clubs, and the pages of national magazines are now openly talking about this broken contract. Their actions, described below, demonstrate their willingness to make a personal commitment to rebuild that covenant.

Who is driving the work of public engagement?

Public engagement is a collaborative process between or among a variety of players both inside schools and outside in the broader community. Still, these collaborations are usually begun and in many instances sustained by a particular group of people. Five broad groups emerged from this research as the principal "drivers" of public engagement efforts today: parents; civic leaders and business people; education professionals; elected or appointed officials and policy makers; and local or statewide collaborations, coalitions, and networks.

problems facing today's kids

% saying problem is very serious

	General Public	Parents
Public schools fail to give kids a good education	49%	52%
Kids lack the support of strong communities where neighbors care about them	40%	44%

Source: Public Agenda, *Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think about the Next Generation (1997)*

Parents

Parents are often key drivers of engagement efforts. They may be carpenters or computer experts, health-care professionals or working moms, but they have a direct stake in the health and well-being of schools that serve their children. Whether in New York's South Bronx or in rural Washington State, parent groups seek greater involvement in school governance and decision making. They attempt to participate actively not only in the education of their own children but in policy discussions that affect entire schools or districts. As Ann Duffy of **Parents for Public Schools** in Jackson, Mississippi, says, "We are helping parents find their own voice as advocates for their children and owners of their schools."

Some parent efforts are openly confrontational, especially where parents' concerns have been ignored or rebuffed by school officials. These parent groups – whether in affluent suburbs or low-income urban areas – may train their members in organizing techniques in order to get their voices heard and to press school bureaucracies for change.

Imagining a New Future

Howard Public Schools
Howard, South Dakota

Howard, South Dakota, is a rural community fifty miles northwest of Sioux Falls in the heart of the Upper Great Plains. Like many other farming communities in the United States, Howard is struggling to survive. Surrounding Miner County has shrunk from 8,000 people to fewer than 3,000. More than half of the county's households earn less than $20,000. A significant percentage of Howard High School graduates go on to college, but many do not return, finding jobs and lives in medium-sized and big cities across the upper Midwest.

In 1995, educators and students joined with rest of Miner County to think about and create a more viable future for their community. Randy Parry, director of the Howard schools' Rural Resource Center, has convened a series of public conversations around selected readings about rural life, agriculture, community politics, local history, and economics. Often held in people's homes, these seminars evolved into a community-visioning process through which students, along with teachers, parents, and other community members, have found ways to develop strategic responses to their community's problems.

For example, Howard's tax base had been dwindling, and the town was struggling to support quality fire, safety, and lighting services. After studying the issue, Howard High School students – with a grant from the Program for Rural School and Community Renewal, an Annenberg Rural Challenge grantee – conducted the Community Cash Flow Project, which documented residents' spending behavior in and out of Miner County. The students' findings, which were subsequently publicized through the local media, demonstrated that raising in-county spending levels by 10 percent would increase local retail sales by $2.4 million each year. Miner County residents responded by increasing their in-county spending a whopping 27 percent, giving a much-needed boost to the area's economy, and adding $30,000 to the city of Howard's tax coffers.

Also as a result of the community's public conversations, Howard High School has begun to reimagine its role more broadly as a critically needed civic institution. The school has opened itself up to the community, providing access to the gym for local people, inviting the community to use the school library during the day, and setting up an indoor area for older residents to walk in inclement weather. In addition, the district secured federal funds to build a campus greenhouse, where students are developing a wholesale plant and flower operation.

The high school's new Rural Resource Center, situated in the literal center of the building, serves as a vibrant meeting place for students, teachers, and community members. Last year, the Resource Center conducted open houses on five historical themes – harvest, hunt, veterans, church histories, and rural schools. For each theme, the Center asked senior citizens to share artifacts and stories from their experience growing up in the area. The seniors felt more connected to the school, and students learned history – not just the history of faraway places from books, but the special history of their own place.

"We had been caught up in the 'global village' thing and were losing who we are," said Randy Parry. "We were exporting our natural products, as well as our children. Now our children are helping us develop ways to transform Howard into a place they want to live their lives in."

Civic Leaders and Business People

Civic leaders and business people are driving local as well as regional and statewide engagement work. Their interest is defined not by a particular school or child but rather by a broader community interest in a productive citizenry or in high school graduates prepared for employment. "All of our work is based on the question, 'What is the role of education in the region's vitality?'" says Shareen Bell of the **Joint Venture/Silicon Valley 21st-Century Education Initiative** (see page 38), a school improvement project sponsored by many of the growing technology firms in California's Silicon Valley.

In some places, community leaders and business groups are perceived as trustworthy conveners or reliable sources of information. In others, their stature and standing in the community lend weight to school change efforts. Sometimes they simply act as good community and corporate citizens. William E. Smith, Jr., chairman of **A+ Research Foundation,** an Alabama citizens' reform initiative comprising community leaders from across the state, says his group has used engagement strategies to improve education because "no one else has stepped forward to do this work." In Louisiana, the **Council for A Better Louisiana** (cabl) (see page 34), a nonprofit statewide organization, is a key lobbying force with education policy makers who are aware of cabl's constant engagement with citizens. Says Stephanie Desselle of cabl, "We engage the voters to help them articulate their concerns about education."

Public engagement is... where the general public becomes a partner in the governance and decision-making processes of the school.

ROGER EVANS
Olivehill Accelerated School
Dayton, OH

As participants in engagement efforts, community leaders and business people may represent values that are quite different from, though no less valid than, those of parents with children in schools. Understanding and incorporating the views of nonparents into a public engagement effort is crucial, as they are often representative of the majority of people living in a particular community. In fact, across the country, only one in four households today has school-age children.

Education Professionals

District superintendents, principals, administrators – and, to a much lesser extent, teachers – are driving some public engagement efforts. Educators are often seeking to engage their colleagues in developing and implementing school or district standards or other educational reform initiatives. Public engagement in this context serves as a strategy for ensuring that school reforms make sense to school-site personnel and that educators are willing and able to carry out those reforms in their schools and classrooms.

In many communities, school people are also engaging parents and/or other community members outside of schools to join them in the work of revitalizing a district or to provide input on how to improve learning and teaching. "We're trying to turn the tables," says school superintendent Charles Irish of **Medina, Ohio**, "to get the community to tell schools what they should look like."

Elected Officials and Policy Makers

City council members, state legislators, and administrators in local and state government often become involved with public engagement work as a result of demands from grassroots efforts by local communities to change their schools. In some initiatives, elected and appointed officials themselves engage key school and community stakeholders in town hall discussions or ongoing task forces and councils that inform the crafting of new legislation or policy.

In Kentucky, Washington, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Florida, for example, elected officials have created education legislation that mandates parent participation, representative site-based councils, ongoing community comment, or some other public engagement mechanism. In the best cases, as with the Kentucky and Washington state education reform acts, legislation has not only

Creating a Climate for Change

Plainfield Public Schools
Plainfield, New Jersey

Larry Leverett, in the tradition of Yale education reformer Dr. James Comer, believes that children are educated in their homes and communities, as well as in their schools. So for Leverett, who became superintendent of the Plainfield Public Schools in April 1995, engaging parents and community members in the work of schools makes sense. "Education," he says, "is a shared responsibility."

Leverett came to Plainfield – a Central New Jersey community of 47,000 that includes both historic Victorian neighborhoods and significant areas of urban blight – hoping to turn around a school system plagued by poor academic achievement, an unresponsive bureaucracy, and a school board looking for change. During the preceding two decades, many of Plainfield's middle-class families – both white and African American – had been expressing their displeasure with the district by pulling their children out of the public schools.

Leverett began to rebuild trust in the school system by making available information about student test scores, district finances, and the condition of the school's physical plant – most of it bad news previously hidden from the public. He then convened a seventeen-member Community Planning Task Force comprising community leaders, parents, and educators.

Despite initial misgivings, the Task Force eventually involved 225 people on six design teams. Together, they crafted a District Blueprint for Education Excellence, which was presented in a public forum in June 1996. The school district, in turn, supported this work by incorporating many of the Blueprint's recommendations into its annual budget. Action teams of educators and community members have subsequently developed additional aspects of the Blueprint, including an education foundation to support Plainfield schools and a district report card designed to hold administrators accountable over time.

In the meantime, other efforts to engage members of Plainfield school faculties have proved successful in several ways. Early in his tenure, Leverett brought in Conflict Management, Inc., to give nine conflict-resolution training sessions over thirteen weeks with both district officials and representatives from the local school unions.

This up-front intervention paid off. In the spring of 1996, the district and its teachers quickly reached agreement on a new contract. Today, teachers and staff are active partners in the district's change agenda, serving on site-based councils at all thirteen of Plainfield's school buildings. And when a budget crunch developed during the 1996–97 year, 40 percent of teachers and other school employees participated in a voluntary 0.5 percent giveback of the raise they had negotiated the previous spring.

Just two and a half years after Leverett's arrival, there are several tangible outcomes of the district's ongoing public engagement work. Taxpayers have issued a vote of confidence in the schools, passing a $33.9-million bond issue for capital and technology improvements. Adult-education enrollment has grown substantially; and parent participation in school events is on the rise. Student attendance is up, and disciplinary actions are down. Nevertheless, student achievement, especially as measured by standardized tests, has not budged.

Leverett worries that the public support and trust built up over the last two years will quickly erode if public engagement doesn't soon translate into better learning. "Achievement – that's where we're focused now," he says.

Common Characteristics of Public Engagement Initiatives

In spite of their seeming diversity, public engagement efforts share several important traits.

An inclusive and dialogue-driven process

School and citizen's initiatives advocate and promote conversation and decision making that genuinely involve all constituencies in the community in school-related issues. Meetings are held in multiple languages and nontraditional sites, creating a "safe space" such as church basements or living rooms

brought about what was demanded by the law but also sparked broader conversations about schools between districts and the parents and other community members they serve.

Collaborations, Coalitions, and Networks

In certain situations, no one group is responsible for driving an engagement process. An individual or institution may organize the initial stages of an engagement effort, but a collaborative of people – both inside and outside schools and districts – quickly comes together to push the work forward, and responsibility for the engagement effort is subsequently shared by a coalition of groups or individuals. In other instances, national or regional nonprofit organizations provide the impetus for an engagement process through a network of affiliates or a national program that connects with local sites. Networks or programs such as the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Right Question Project, the Public Education Network, and the Study Circles Resource Center influence a wide variety of public engagement activities, from parent organizing efforts to public conversation and deliberation initiatives.

Other networks around school reform have placed a high priority on parent and community involvement. Reform networks, such as the Accelerated Schools Network, the Institute for Responsive Education, and many of the Annenberg Challenge sites – including Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York City, Boston, Chattanooga, Chicago, **Philadelphia** (see page 24), and the Rural Challenge – have crafted new roles for parents and community within systemic school change efforts that are important models for future study.

What kinds of public engagement efforts are there?

The term *public engagement* does not refer to any one particular type of program nor any one particular focus. Rather, public engagement encompasses a broad range of activities that share a number of common characteristics (see sidebar).

where dialogue can be an effective antidote to the sometimes uncivil and caustic discourse around school change. Many develop creative strategies for reaching parents who need to be involved but choose not to be. They train local parents about their rights, how to exercise them, and how to reach out to the educators in their schools. Educators listen more attentively and interact more effectively with community members, especially to those who have traditionally felt excluded or unwelcome in schools for reasons of race, class, or culture.

A dedication to making real improvements in schools

Public engagement efforts seek meaningful and long-term change in schools and districts. Some focus directly on curricular and other institutional change in schools. They include healthy amounts of dialogue but always move to action. Well-developed initiatives create consensus around what schools should teach and what children should learn, a process which participants expect will lead either directly or indirectly to improved student achievement.

A commitment to creating dynamic partnerships

Public engagement everywhere is a two- or multi-way conversation that brings parents, community members, educators, business people, and others to the table and enables them to play meaningful roles in discussions and decisions that affect schools and children. Together, representatives from all these groups work to share responsibility for the health and effectiveness of their public schools.

Sincere efforts to find common ground

Engagement initiatives work to establish common ground and then move toward broad consensus around school-related issues. They aim to broaden and deepen the conversations about these issues that occur in the larger community – whether in supermarket aisles, the pages of the newspaper, the local Kiwanis club, or city hall – and increase community capacity to frame options that can work even when the choices are difficult.

An atmosphere of candor and mutual trust

Participants in effective public engagement efforts attempt to listen to and understand viewpoints that are not their own and to speak truthfully about the conditions of schools. Accurate information is made available in a timely manner to all stakeholders. For engagement to succeed, all participants must act with compassion and integrity.

Fighting for Better Schools

Mothers on the Move
The Bronx, New York

In 1992 a group of women in the South Bronx went to visit a fourth-grade classroom as part of an adult literacy class sponsored by the nonprofit Bronx Educational Services (BES). The "field trip" was intended to convince children to stay in school so that they wouldn't have to go back to school as adults. But the women were outraged by what they saw – a rude, insensitive teacher and a school culture disrespectful of children. Their anger prompted them to action, and with support from BES, they formed Mothers on the Move or, appropriately, MOM.

Today, MOM is an independent nonprofit organization that includes some 700 moms (and some dads), all seeking to improve the schools their children attend. During the last five years, they have fought an uphill battle with these troubled schools, as well as with New York City's Community School District 8, which is responsible for administering the area's elementary and middle schools.

MOM employs a community-organizing approach that includes a lot of time "on the doors," that is, visiting the neighborhood's tenements and apartment buildings and talking face to face with community residents. In entryways and in living rooms, MOM's organizers listen for concerns about children and schools. These issues become MOM's agenda. Regular meetings held in the group's mural-covered storefront headquarters on Intervale Avenue provide a gathering place for parents, who work with organizers to develop plans of action.

Depending on the issue and the parents involved, MOM will create strategies to work with a particular school or principal to implement a new reading program or move drug activity away from school grounds. Or MOM will lobby District 8 administrators to ensure the fair allocation of textbook funds. They even marched on the home of a former New York City Schools chancellor to bring attention to the critical needs of the ten struggling schools in their neighborhood.

Part of MOM's broader strategy has been to build leaders from its own ranks in order to swell the community's capacity to make change for itself. Involved parents participate in a broad range of trainings that enhance their public-speaking and meeting-facilitation skills and expand their knowledge of the New York City school system's complex policies and programs. As a result, MOM has developed powerful parent-driven leadership: two of MOM's moms have been elected to serve on the District 8 Community School Board and one is on New York State's Visiting Committee for Low-Performing Schools.

Some other tangible achievements include playing an active role in forcing out and now choosing the replacement for the former District 8 superintendent, who, they say, had allowed the deterioration of their South Bronx schools over the last two decades. They have developed productive relationships with a few of the area's principals and developed a proposal to restructure a failing junior high school. Nevertheless, many administrators remain wary of MOM and its outspoken demands and aggressive activism for improvement of the neighborhood's schools.

"We hope we can work collaboratively with the new superintendent and that there will be a different attitude from the principals," says MOM co-director Mili Bonilla. "There needs to be some type of cultural change in the way they view parents. In the meantime, we try to take the high road and keep doing the work we're doing."

Many public engagement initiatives, however, fall clearly into one of the categories described below. Others are more complex. They may straddle several of these types or evolve into new forms in response to changing conditions and new challenges in local schools and communities. Taken together, however, the following seven types describe the broad focuses of public engagement today: parent participation, community and parent organizing, standards development and implementation, strategic planning/community visioning, public conversation and deliberation, governance and shared-decision making, legislation and policy development.

Parent Participation

Engagement efforts that seek greater parent participation in their children's schools are motivated by the belief that parent involvement is critical to improving student achievement and that parents serve as the schools' most important link to the larger community. These initiatives are generated by the schools themselves, by a local community agency that serves as a catalyst for greater parent involvement, or by parents coming together on behalf of their children and their schools.

Some of the most potent parent participation efforts have developed formal or informal mechanisms that enable parents to ensure that schools meet their children's education needs. In Jackson, Mississippi, for

parent involvement

Percent of 8th graders who attend schools where school officials say lack of parent involvement is a moderate or serious problem:

Urban districts	64%
Nonurban districts	42%

Source: Educational Testing Service, unpublished tabulations from 1996 NAEP mathematics test

Would you approve of your local schools adopting some or all of these education improvement ideas?

85% or more of parents approve of ideas to:

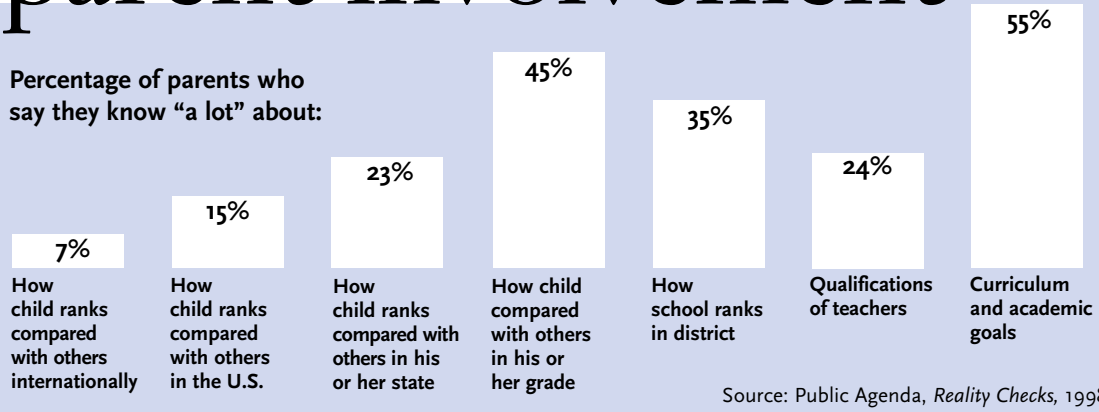
- Make parent and community involvement a key component of the education experience
- Hold students to high academic standards
- Teach students projects that connect their studies to real life situations
- Teach students to work independently
- Teach students to work in groups
- Measure learning by keeping a portfolio of student work
- Involve the business community in changing schools

Percentage of parents willing to:

participate in a parent/teacher organization	42%
assist in public school classroom	41%
serve on public school planning committee	35%
contribute money to help fund computers	34%

Source: Education Commission of the States, *Listen, Discuss and Act: Parents' and Teachers' Views on Education Reform* (1996)

Percentage of parents who say they know "a lot" about:



Source: Public Agenda, *Reality Checks,* 1998.

Engagement in the City

The Children Achieving Challenge
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Children Achieving Challenge is a public-private partnership to support the district's efforts to improve the Philadelphia school system. The Challenge is funded by a $50-million grant from the Annenberg Foundation and almost $100 million in matching funds from corporations, foundations, and publicly competitive grants.

The Challenge effort takes its name from the ten-part Children Achieving plan by which Superintendent David Hornbeck and his administration are seeking to revitalize the city's 257 public schools. Among the ten components of the plan are setting high standards, devolving decision making, adding more professional development, and engaging the public in shaping and supporting school improvement.

The plan was created with significant input from task forces that included parents, community members, business and political leaders, and others. Still, Children Achieving was criticized as an "outsider's" plan (Hornbeck came to Philadelphia from school reform efforts in Kentucky and Maryland), and its dense and jargon-heavy presentation made it sound formidable to many parents and non-educators.

During the last year and a half, the Challenge has worked hard to help allay these concerns and to support and supplement the district's public engagement efforts on behalf of Children Achieving. The Challenge has promoted the district's move toward local school-site councils that allow parents – as well as teachers and students – to participate in site-based management of their schools. To provide an independent voice for parents, the Challenge funds the Alliance Organizing Project (AOP), using a parent-organizing approach in forty-five schools. AOP works to build parents' and community members' ability to hold individual schools and, in fact, the entire district accountable for its promised reforms.

The work of the Challenge is a team effort with city administration, the school district, and other partners. Among the cooperative ventures is the Philadelphia Education Summit, called by Mayor Edward Rendall, City Council President John Street, and the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition, which has held more than forty Town Hall Forums throughout the city designed to ask communities what they want from their public schools.

The "team" effort extends broadly throughout the community in a variety of projects designed to tap into the many constituencies that influence urban education. Project 10,000, an effort to recruit community volunteers into the schools, has already attracted more than 12,000 people willing to spend time tutoring and helping out in classrooms. Senior citizens and churches are being engaged in the Safe Corridors Program, which ensures that children can make the daily passage to and from school free from crime, drugs, and harassment. And the School-to-Career initiative has enlisted more than 300 Philadelphia businesses to provide mentoring and work-based experiences for more than 2,000 juniors and seniors, and engaged over 14,000 students in ninth- and tenth-grade mentoring and job-shadowing activities.

The Challenge and its partners have lately begun to focus more on in-school audiences, particularly teachers. Recently, teachers have begun playing an important role in the district's development of more rigorous content standards and curriculum frameworks for this system in which fewer than half of its 215,000 students display even basic knowledge and skills in reading, math, and science. Teachers helped prepare the initial draft of the new standards and later provided feedback, along with parents and other community members, at twenty-two public forums.

Despite a recent survey showing that Philadelphia's teachers support the new standards initiative, many of the district reform efforts originally met with limited enthusiasm from teachers and their union, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. As a facilitator of dialogue about reform, the Challenge undertook to publish *Philadelphia Teacher,* an award-winning monthly publication that explains many of the complex issues and reforms to both teachers and the community. The 30,000 copies are sent far beyond teacher mailboxes and are having an impact on helping everyone understand the challenges facing Philadelphia. The district, the Challenge, and the many partners in Children Achieving have worked hard to intensify the resources and support available to teachers. "I think one of the tough lessons we have learned," says Vicki Phillips, executive director of the Children Achieving Challenge, "is that you have to work with internal audiences first."

There is still a long road to travel, but glimmers of hope have appeared: test scores rose in 202 schools for the first time in many years; parent and public involvement is rising; and education has risen to the forefront of the city and state agendas."I would say our efforts to engage teachers and the public are about at a four on a scale of one to ten," says Phillips. "We've done a great deal of work, but we haven't gone far enough yet."

example, **Parents for Public Schools** has created a Task Force to Accelerate School Improvement. This parent-driven group meets at least once a month with representatives from the state department of education, members of the community, and the district superintendent. Gathering questions and issues from community surveys and from parents serving on local site-based councils, the task force airs a wide range of concerns about school accessibility, overcrowding, teacher quality, and inadequate facilities; develops strategies to address these concerns; and serves as a catalyst for change.

Public engagement is... not just a matter of getting a lot of people together in a meeting. It's where the community and the school district actually hear each other. We're afraid that people will get emotional and angry, when they already are both those things.

CHARLIE IRISH
Medina, OH, Public Schools

Parent participation initiatives often include training designed to increase parents' confidence and ability to interact effectively with school personnel. In San Diego, the **Parents Alliance for School Standards** works with parents to help them ask teachers good questions about what school standards mean in their particular schools and for their children. In Paterson, New Jersey, the **Paterson Education Fund** (pef) has developed several strategies for building parents' capacity to advocate for their children's education. These include the Family Friendly Computer Program, which since 1996 has loaned out more than 1,000 computers to public school families to increase parent's computer savvy as well as their willingness to advocate for better computer-based instruction in Paterson's classrooms. pef has also worked with the **Right Question Project** – a program based in Somerville, Massachusetts, that trains parents to ask the questions necessary to monitor and support their children's educational progress. During the last two years, thirty-five Paterson parents received Right Question Project training and are now in the process of training hundreds of others in this parent participation strategy.

In many places, gaining access to and understanding school budgets, policies, and other data are central aspects of parent participation efforts. In Philadelphia, the **Parents Union for Public Schools** maintains a comprehensive library of fiscal and organizational information, as well as test scores and attendance rates, for each of the schools in the district. The Parent's Union has also created Mini-Resource Centers in thirty-two schools citywide that provide information to the parents of that particular school. To help people use this information more effectively, the union holds trainings and workshops to strengthen parents' participation on school councils, which are part of the Philadelphia school system's sweeping reform plan.

Some parent participation efforts have been created by administrators or teachers. Seven years ago, the staff at Boston's **Patrick O'Hearn Elementary School,** which participates in the Institute for Responsive Education's Responsive Schools Project, identified family involvement as their number-one priority. After identifying potential parent leaders, O'Hearn administrators opened a family center during the school day, sponsored workshops for family members during and after school, and invited parents to serve on a school management team and to join an instructional leadership committee that has implemented a home reading program. Ninety-eight percent of families now participate in this program. A similar percentage meet with teachers to examine student progress on portfolios, and school officials report that student performance, behavior, and attendance have all improved significantly.

Community and Parent Organizing

Organizing initiatives are grassroots efforts that seek to build dynamic parent and community constituencies to advocate for school change, often in very challenging circumstances. Many of these projects are found in underperforming school districts in low-

Building a Culture of Engagement

Pattonville Community Schools
Maryland Heights, Missouri

In the mid-1980s, the Pattonville Community Schools, a suburban district just outside St. Louis, confronted a demographic reality facing many school systems today. The percentage of households with school-age children had sharply declined, and local bond issues, previously passed with enthusiastic majorities, had begun to fail. A growing number of senior citizens in the community had come to fear the area's young people and were decreasing their support for public education.

When Roger Clough became Pattonville's superintendent in 1985, he knew that something had to be done. "You could look at the issue in two ways," says Clough, who retired in 1997. "It was about the politics of seniors, citizens, and taxes; or it was about understanding why seniors or other citizens were upset and then figuring out how the district and its people could work together to improve communications and develop mutual solutions."

Clough chose the latter: he made a conscious decision to engage community members and particularly senior citizens as resources for the district. Instead of being the problem, citizens and seniors were seen as part of the solution. This strategic direction has paid significant dividends over the last fifteen years.

Today, community members and parents are involved as volunteers in each of Pattonville's eleven schools and serve on all of the district's task forces and advisory committees. The district has eschewed polling and has had community volunteers do door-to-door interviews to determine attitudes about proposed policies and to ascertain developing community concerns. New bond issues have been passed to ensure that Pattonville's schools not only keep pace with rising education costs but also better meet the needs of the entire community. New administrative offices include a community education center offering a wide array of services and programs for seniors as well as students. A new community theater at the high school focuses on arts and entertainment programs attended by the whole community. When senior citizens are invited to an evening of dinner and theater at the high school, more than 600 attend.

In addition to involvement, parents and community members play important roles in key decisions about the district – from adding a character-values program in new curriculum designs to plotting reorganization plans. Parents and students also serve on school councils and share responsibility for advising on policy matters. Administrators even seek annual input from area realtors as well as the mayor and town councils of the three municipalities that make up the Pattonville district.

Perhaps Pattonville's most important work has been engaging the parents of the nearly 1,100 students voluntarily bused to its schools each day from center-city St. Louis. Citizens' Councils ensure a greater voice for the parents of these predominantly African American students in the district's affairs. PTA meetings and parent-teacher conferences are often held in downtown St. Louis to make it easier for parents to attend, and the Pattonville School Board schedules regular meetings in all the neighborhoods served by the Pattonville schools, including St. Louis. This kind of sustained involvement, district leaders say, is one of the reasons children from these areas graduate at rates (nearly 90 percent) similar to the rest of Pattonville's students.

Despite the success of its engagement efforts over time, Pattonville still faces serious challenges. A proposed expansion of the St. Louis International Airport threatens the seizure by eminent domain of one-fifth of the homes in the district. Recent attacks on the state desegregation program – which subsidizes cross-district busing – could jeopardize the continuing presence of students from St. Louis neighborhoods. And while better than the national average, student test scores have been flat for the last five years. Nevertheless, Pattonville remains optimistic. As Roger Clough puts it, "We have opportunities here, not problems."

parent involvement

income rural and urban communities. The emphasis in all of these initiatives is on developing the community's capacity to identify its own concerns, marshal its resources, and work for change from school bureaucracies. Local organizers work in the community; meet parents in homes, churches, and community centers; identify area leaders; and train them in turn to organize other parents or community members. Student and school data are often used to demonstrate the state of education in the area and to galvanize parents and others to action.

Relationships among parents are at the core of these organizing efforts, which depend on developing a strong sense of mutual trust and confidence as the work proceeds. **Baltimoreans United In Leadership Development** (build) began to develop these relationships by establishing after-school programs at ten Baltimore schools. build organizers have connected with parents, who now serve as volunteer staff at these programs. This work with parents is part of a broader parent organizing process that includes listening to their concerns, helping them develop leadership skills, and encouraging them to organize other parents and community members around school issues. Given this reliance on relationships, parent organizing efforts like build include heavy doses of face-to-face meetings, door-to-door canvassing, and public actions that bring people physically together. This process seeks to build a stronger sense of community while improving schools.

Some parent organizing efforts are confrontational in nature as they begin. Administrators – and in some cases teachers, especially those unused to answering probing questions from the public in meaningful ways – are often initially resistant to input from people outside

Percent saying they would be "very comfortable" complimenting a neighbor's child who has done a good deed or done well in school

General Public	85%
Parents	89%
African American Parents	89%
Hispanic Parents	81%
White Parents	89%

Percent saying they have done something like the above in past six months

General Public	70%
Parents	78%
African American Parents	76%
Hispanic Parents	71%
White Parents	79%

Percent saying they would be "very comfortable" volunteering to be a mentor or help in some way at a local school

General Public	48%
Parents	55%
African American Parents	61%
Hispanic Parents	56%
White Parents	54%

Percent saying they have done something like the above in past six months

General Public	24%
Parents	33%
African American Parents	34%
Hispanic Parents	29%
White Parents	32%

Source: Public Agenda, *Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think about the Next Generation* (1997)

A Bluegrass-Roots Approach to Change

Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence
Lexington, Kentucky

The Prichard Committee grew out of the 1980 Kentucky Council on Higher Education's Committee on Higher Education and Kentucky's Future, chaired by Lexington lawyer Edward F. Prichard. The committee's 1981 report argued that many of the problems facing higher education in Kentucky stemmed from shortcomings in its K–12 system. When the report's analysis drew little response, the committee disbanded and re-formed as the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, committed to creating a citizen voice for better elementary and secondary schools in Kentucky, as well as for improvements in higher education.

In 1984, after two years of studying the issues, the Prichard Committee organized a televised, statewide town forum on education, through which 20,000 people participated in local discussions about the condition of their schools. The forum generated 6,000 recorded individual comments, 15,000 written statements, and 200 letters to the Committee. It led to the development of local committees to push for reform at the district level. And it prompted a special legislative session on education.

At the same time, sixty-six school districts joined in a suit against the state's education finance system. In 1989, the Kentucky Supreme Court ruled the state's public school system unconstitutional and ordered the state legislature to create a new one. The result was the passage in 1990 of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), one of the nation's most comprehensive school reform packages. Many of the Committee's recommendations, set out in a 1985 report, became part of that legislation.

Since the passage of KERA, the Prichard Committee's role has changed from reform driver to reform partner. Robert F. Sexton, who has served as the Committee's executive director from its inception, recalls that "there was a real challenge, moving from being *against* [bad schools] to being *for* reform. And it's easy to get derailed in the details."

KERA had plenty of details in its sweeping, mandated, state-of-the-art reforms in curriculum, assessment, finance, and support services. To help explain the law, the Committee organized Community Committees for Education. These local affiliates of the Prichard Committee were also charged with identifying citizen needs, assessing and reporting on local progress, and assisting in the implementation of the reforms where necessary.

The Committee has continued to provide a wide range of resources to help local schools, parents, community organizations, and others understand the impact of the education reform act over time. These resources include community support coordinators who work full-time out in the state connecting with volunteers.

Working in collaboration with Kentucky members of the Business Roundtable, the Prichard Committee has also helped organize the Partnership for Kentucky Schools, a nonpartisan coalition of public and private leaders from Kentucky businesses and civic, governmental, and education organizations. The Partnership has installed a 1-800 telephone number to provide ready access to information about KERA and has funded a public information campaign – as well as employer and community involvement programs – designed to support the reforms.

The Prichard Committee has also worked to both educate and empower parents as important resources for sustaining interest in reform and school change over time. Parents and Teachers Talking Together, a series of informal school-parent public dialogues on change and reform, has involved hundreds of schools and thousands of parents throughout the state. And the Committee recently launched the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, a program that helps parents better understand standards, student work, and information on student achievement. Both programs are geared at deepening public support and educating new generations of citizens about the value of strong schools.

Since 1990, critics have attempted to derail and even abolish KERA in the legislature, but the grassroots support that the Prichard Committee helped generate for the law has been instrumental in its survival. "We've bought time for the system to implement the reforms," says Sexton. "And we continue to build support for higher academic standards by pushing for better teacher training and professional development, and more engagement in schools by parents and the public, and by keeping these and other issues before the public and policymakers."

the school building. This lack of communication can be fostered by long-standing race, class, and language differences between educators and parents, barriers that have historically shut many parents out of the conversation with schools. With support and leadership-development training from organizers, however, parents can develop increased confidence and the ability to strengthen their demands on schools. When a group of residents of the South Bronx, New York, visited a local elementary school with an adult literacy class, they were dismayed at the low achievement of students and meager resources available to help them. Soon afterwards, ten women formed **Mothers on the Move** (see page 22), a grassroots organization that has developed a powerful partnership among neighborhood residents, social service agencies, local foundations, and parents to push for improved education and student performance in their neighborhood schools.

Over time, successful organizing efforts can result in dynamic collaborations between energized parents and school personnel. At the **Sam Houston Elementary School** in Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas, organizers from the Texas Interfaith Alliance of the Industrial Areas Foundation teamed initially with teachers and school staff to visit parents' homes. They found that parents' top concern was school and community safety. The school then worked with local police to deploy two additional officers to the area around the school. They also joined forces to clean up a dangerous alley that is now monitored by parents. Working on subsequent issues identified by parents, the Alliance team developed a contract of expectations signed by teachers, students, and parents; created report-card nights for parents to come in to school every six weeks; and hired a consultant to design ways to improve teaching and student achievement in math.

Standards Development and Implementation

Clear and rigorous standards are at the heart of many school change efforts today. Developing these standards, however, can be contentious, and implementing them requires the understanding, commitment, and support of a wide variety of stakeholders both inside and outside the schools. Statewide engagement efforts in Maryland, Massachusetts, Kentucky, and Washington have developed a policy consensus on standards that includes statewide business and civic leaders, as well as local parent and community groups.

Public engagement is... just trying to create a public conversation where there's interest and then building the will to take some action. It's the same organizing process in a school to change culture and gain consensus as any other issue.

CARRIE LOUGHLIN
Industrial Areas Foundation
Austin, TX

Some of these efforts begin by bringing together stakeholders in and out of schools to deliberate publicly and quite generally about what children should know and be able to do as they move through school. Starting at its formation in 1990, the **Maine Coalition for Excellence in Education** began gathering educators, community members, and business people to develop a statewide plan for broad education standards for K–12 students. After holding hearings and conducting surveys to gather public input, the Coalition created a standards plan called Learning Results. After the legislature approved the plan's guiding principles and eight content areas, the Coalition then reconnected with people through a more collaborative process that included town hall meetings. All told, the Coalition's engagement process convened more than 10,000 people. This broad base of support eventually led to the passage of plan's rules and actual content standards in the spring of 1997.

At the district level, some initiatives use focus groups and discussion meetings to enable parents and others to weigh in about the content of particular standards. The **Long Beach (California) Unified School District,** for example, involved some 300 people in the community in several roundtable conversations around

Democracy in Action

Parent Organizing Project
Spokane, Washington

The Washington Education Reform Act of 1993 provided for the possibility of site-based decision-making in all of the state's schools. This attempt to devolve responsibility for education to the people on the front lines – administrators, teachers, parents, and other community members – was seen as an opportunity by the Washington Rural Organizing Project. Beginning in 1990 the Rural Organizing Project has been working in the Columbia River area, attempting to bring together rural populations around the issues that were central to their lives. Members of the Washington Education Association, school administrators, and the Rural Organizing Project began strategizing together the best avenue to restructure public education in eastern Washington. "The 1993 legislation gave us a chance to engage parents in meaningful ways," recalls former teachers' union rep Joe Chrastil, "without opening a floodgate of parents charging into classrooms and overwhelming teachers."

With support from the Washington Education Association and school districts in eastern Washington, Chrastil and colleague Joe Gaffney-Brown initiated the Parents Organizing Project – nicknamed POP – to develop the work of involving parents and others traditionally excluded from decision making about schools. The goal, in Chrastil's words, has been to build "public judgment about public education through public involvement."

Their efforts began in four schools in Spokane District 81. Today, POP organizers, often trained through the Industrial Areas Foundation, are supporting the creation and development of Site Councils in seventeen schools in Spokane County and other school districts throughout eastern Washington. The work begins with the development of a school organizing team comprising the principal, three to four teachers, and six to eight parents, plus one or two community members. The organizing team receives training from POP and then reaches out to others in the school community through grade-level meetings facilitated by teams of parents and teachers. These grade-specific groups discuss curricular issues and learning goals for their children.

Eventually, the school community creates a covenant and charter and elects a Site Council. The covenant lays out the beliefs and values of the school community; the charter describes the Site Council's membership and decision-making structure. A community assembly ratifies the covenant and charter, and the Site Council then officially begins its work.

If this effort sounds process-heavy, it is. Principals cannot mandate the involvement of parents and others who have been disenfranchised from their schools. Building relationships and identifying leaders who represent all the voices in a school and community does not happen by decree. "Building the power, energy, and capacity of all of these people to work in a public way takes time and patience," says Gaffney-Brown. "So does identifying what common values and beliefs we can bring to bear to change the school community."

It is too early to know what impact this work may eventually have on student achievement, but POP's Site Councils appear to be more dynamic, more democratic, and more representative than those where parents and teachers are handpicked by a principal or elected by small numbers of their peers. As Gaffney-Brown notes, "We have to stop inviting parents and others to meetings and then not listening to them."

standards-based reform in its middle schools. Supported with a grant from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, these discussions were then supplemented by leadership development work with twenty-two middle school principals to help them better listen to and involve parents and community members around this reform as it moved forward.

In other engagement work around local standards, newsletters and informational materials seek to provide clarity to existing or developing standards and serve as mechanisms to help readers (often community members and parents) ask questions and raise objections. In partnership with schools, some communities develop standards in the form of broad school accountability measures like school or district report cards. The **San Francisco Bay Area School Reform Collaborative** – a regional collaboration among schools or school districts and support providers that is part of the Annenberg Challenge – has mounted a major campaign to help schools develop the capacity to link standards, student achievement, and school performance to parent and community expectations.

Once standards – especially statewide benchmarks – are adopted, public engagement continues and is often even more important. In many places, it is needed to sustain political and popular support for standards over time – especially as governors and administrations change. For example, the Washington Business Roundtable, a public policy group comprising the CEOs from many of the state's largest corporations, helped to create the nonprofit **Partnership for Learning** (PFL) to build public awareness about state standards created in a 1993 education reform package. PFL has maintained a political consensus for these standards by engaging opin-

Improving Performance

"For each idea I'd like you to tell me if you think it would improve kids' academic achievement. Use a 5 point scale where 5 means that it would improve academic achievement a great deal and 1 means it would not improve academic achievement at all."

Percentages rating item 4 or 5	Public	Parents
Not allowing kids to graduate from high school until they demonstrate they can write and speak English well	88%	89%
Emphasizing such work habits as being on time, dependable and disciplined	88%	91%
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	82%	87%

Source: Public Agenda, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (1994)

Do you think that _____would be a very effective way to help kids, somewhat effective, not too effective, or not effective at all?

Percent Saying "Very Effective"	Public	Parents
Improving the quality of the public schools	67%	71%
More programs and activities for kids to do after school in places like community centers	60%	60%
Employers giving parents more flexible work schedules so they can spend more time with their kids	55%	57%
More involvement by volunteer organizations dedicated to kids, like the Boy Scouts and the YMCA	53%	51%

Source: Public Agenda, *Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think about the Next Generation* (1997)

Understanding Community Values

Medina City Schools
Medina, Ohio

WHEN A COMMUNITY MEMBER called to complain about a painting of Jesus hanging in Garfield Elementary School, Medina Schools Superintendent Charlie Irish quickly realized he had a problem. The picture had hung in the school for more than fifty years. The community member, however, had contacted the American Civil Liberties Union and was threatening a law suit against the district. Subsequent legal research revealed that Medina probably was in violation of the Establishment clause of the Constitution and might be subject to an expensive and losing legal battle.

The local media quickly got wind of the situation. Rather than stonewall, school officials decided to engage a broad range of school and community people to discuss and resolve the issue. While the presence of the picture in a public school was not legally defensible, some in the community saw it as an exemplar of long-standing values in this growing and changing community that is more than 90 percent Christian.

Irish and other officials gathered public forums and listened in meetings and over the phone to people on both sides of the issue. They learned that the fight was not simply about whether the picture should stay or go. Rather, people – especially those who wanted the picture to remain – were concerned about the influx of commercial culture into their growing town and the erosion of its values. Eventually, the district decided to move the picture to a church across the street and to create a Values Council to identify and propose a curriculum on nonreligious values for Medina's schools. A survey conducted after this decision found that the district's sensitive handling of the issue changed few people's minds about the picture but did significantly increase the community's trust in the school system.

This trust has been further bolstered by Medina's efforts to use a public engagement approach to create a community-supported strategic plan and to decide whether this growing community should build a second high school. The latter issue is being resolved through an extended process that began with five open meetings of the Board of Education. From these forums, three possible solutions were identified: to expand the current high school, to reconfigure the district's grade levels and build a new facility to accommodate grades eight and nine, or to build a second high school.

The Board then set up three committees of educators, parents, and community members to study each idea. A community survey found high awareness of the issue but no consensus on any of the options. Each Board member has made her or his view public (they came out 3-to-2 in favor of the expanded school vs. the second high school). Collectively, they have agreed to hold additional hearings, so that the public can fully understand the ramifications of the two plans. They have agreed that they will vote unanimously for one of the options, says Board member John Sursa, "once the public has come to full judgment."

There is still no decision, but discussions continue; and Irish, for one, has come to understand that the high school question is not simply about buildings but, like the Jesus picture, about community values. "The growth of Medina," he says, "is threatening the old ways of thinking about our community. For many, splitting the high school in two feels like splitting the community. Public engagement is helping us come to terms with this change."

ion leaders through community breakfasts across the state and developing publications that explained the standards clearly to people both in and out of schools. When standards are decreed through state legislation, as in Washington, local engagement efforts are often necessary – p f l is just beginning its local work – to ensure that districts and community people understand and implement these benchmarks in meaningful ways.

Strategic Planning/Community Visioning

These related efforts involve people in schools and in communities in a broad deliberative process. Strategic planning efforts seek to create a community-supported plan for the future of a particular school or district. This kind of approach is characterized by a series of open and deliberative forums, as well as smaller committee meetings that gather key stakeholders around particular issues (e.g., technology, standards, or budget). And, importantly, this process not only benefits the school district but can create a medium through which new community alliances and civic capacity to improve schools are built.

Public engagement is… meeting the public with information and opportunities to become actively involved in an effort, whatever it might be, in making a difference.

Denise Fogerty
Child Care Aware
Rochester, MN

In **Pasadena, California,** for example, community and business leaders sponsored a multiyear public engagement effort called the Education Summit. This work began in earnest with a televised town hall meeting about schools beamed via satellite to eleven remote sites. More than 3,000 people watched an interview with the head of the Chamber of Commerce, the superintendent of schools, and several other education leaders about the state of the Pasadena's schools. People at the sites then discussed the interviews in groups of eight to ten and identified seven areas of concern. At the top of the list were improving school safety and strengthening district communications with community residents. The Pasadena School Board subsequently adopted strategic plans – and convened year-long citizen task forces – to respond to all seven issues that came out of the summit.

Visioning projects focus on the future of the community by looking at the role revitalized or reoriented schools can play. Many of these efforts are in rural towns, where the farm crisis has led young people to leave for nearby (or farther flung) cities and where the public schools are often the community's most potent remaining institution. In these settings, young people can be a driving force for engagement. The schools in tiny **Pollock, South Dakota** (population 400) – an Annenberg Rural Challenge site – responded to a housing shortage and a lack of community services for the elderly by creating a Life Skills curriculum at the high school, where students participated in a long-term community service project that converted a mobile home into assisted-living housing for older residents. This has led to plans for a community center adjacent to the school, which would encourage community use of the school gym and library and provide a home for summer reading programs and the display of community artifacts. Community pride among students is up, say school administrators, who hope that these and other efforts will help students understand the value of rural life and contribute to their willingness to stay and maintain a viable community in Pollock.

Public Conversation and Deliberation

Deliberative public forums are efforts that reach out to connect ordinary citizens to each other and to the problems and challenges of community life. Used across the country to bring members of a community together to talk about tough issues such as race relations and crime prevention, they have been adapted to discuss education challenges as well. These initiatives are sometimes moderated by district officials but are more often overseen by facilitators who receive training and/or use materials developed by national organizations

Building a Citizen Voice for Education

Council for A Better Louisiana
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Since 1962, the Council for A Better Louisiana (CABL) has served as a nonpartisan voice on a variety of issues impacting the lives of people in the Bayou State. In recent years, citizens have told CABL that it should focus more of its attention on improving education in the state. "We believe that Louisiana's future will only be as strong as the quality education available to all," says Harold Suire, CABL's president and chief executive officer.

Citizen concerns about the quality of education in Louisiana are well placed: the state currently ranks at or near the bottom in comparisons with other states on a host of measures – from fourth-grade reading scores to high school dropout rates. And though some point to the state's grinding poverty levels and other mitigating social factors, groups like CABL have buckled down to do something about it.

CABL is working closely with the Louisiana Department of Education to establish a school accountability system based on standards that measure academic achievement. It has teamed with the department's State Accountability Commission to conduct two large public forums to get public input on these standards. When the initial eighty-page draft document on standards was produced, CABL worked with local media to distill the piece down to fourteen pages for broader dissemination. This summary has been posted on the Internet and copies made available through every public library in the state.

CABL's role on accountability is just one example of the productive working relationship it has built with the Department of Education. "CABL enables us to reach an audience that we did not have access to," notes Carole Wallin, deputy superintendent of education. Citizens across the state can look at documents and criticize them; and, she says, it helps the department get an understanding of "the public voice" before policy is made.

CABL has also produced programs that involve people in and out of school systems. Since 1990, CABL has provided incentive grants and technical assistance to start nine local, privately endowed funds for public education. CABL-trained community volunteers raise money and distribute it in grants of up to $1,000 to individual teachers with new ideas.

With support from the BellSouth Foundation, CABL has worked to build the capacity of school board members statewide. In Baton Rouge, CABL helped to initiate Community Action for Public Education (CAPE) to identify people to run in the 1995 local school board election around a common agenda. After developing an "Agenda of Belief" with input and feedback from a group of 150 people, CAPE endorsed and provided political training to candidates in ten of the twelve Baton Rouge school districts. Nine of the ten CAPE-endorsed candidates were subsequently elected.

Four years ago, the state contracted with Southeastern Louisiana University to create a principal's leadership academy. With the support of CABL and other public and private sources, this program provides every new principal with sixty hours of state-mandated training in their first two years on the job. The training includes both personal and organizational analysis and development. More particularly, it provides pointers on public engagement, helping these new principals understand how to incorporate shared decision making in the administration of their schools and how to develop a collaborative schoolwide plan for improvement with significant community input.

Beyond school issues, CABL has worked hard to develop a true citizen voice for Louisiana. While its early work focused on key policy makers and decision makers, it has succeeded more recently in understanding what Suire calls "the will of the people." The People's Agenda Project, for example, uses scientific research, surveys, and focus groups with diverse constituencies to understand voter concerns more clearly. Today, education tops this list, followed closely by crime, jobs, and government ethics.

"We had to broaden our base to listen to people more," says Suire. "Now more stakeholders than ever before are at the table."

such as the **Study Circles Resource Center, the Public Conversations Project of the University of New Hampshire, the National Issues Forums of the Kettering Foundation, or Phi Delta Kappa/PTA.**

These forums have been used to develop community consensus on the purposes of public education, to respond to new education policies, or to resolve specific community problems or concerns. All of these efforts provide at minimum a greater opportunity for people to enter into public conversations about education in a thoughtful and civil way. They build public knowledge about both local and national education issues. And sometimes they do even more.

The **Independent School District 197** in West St. Paul, Minnesota, began a strategic planning process by creating a thirty-two-member task force and then running two town hall meetings. Though the community is split along a variety of racial, ethnic, and class lines, these conversations demonstrated that the public had much in common. There was broad support for public schools as they were currently configured (as opposed to charter schools or vouchers) as well as for a liberal arts/academic curriculum (as opposed to a school-to-work approach). More importantly, the town hall meetings created renewed community interest in the schools, and school-community task forces have subsequently been formed from these discussions to build more effective partnerships with local churches, nonprofit organizations, and elected officials.

While many public forums are one-time events, the best develop a longer-term collaborative process for school change. For example, civic leaders in rural **Orford, New Hampshire** developed education roundtables to discuss how to improve the fiscal viability of their high school, which could not be supported by the town's limited tax base. These discussions helped foster a community commitment to negotiate a partnership with nearby Fairlee, Vermont, share resources, and provide better educational opportunities for both communities' students.

Governance and Shared Decision Making

Shared decision making efforts focus on enabling parents and community members not only to have a voice in educational affairs, but to take part in school or district governance. School-site or district management teams with community membership are often the result of strong parent participation or organizing efforts. They can also derive from district or even state policy designed to devolve responsibility for schools away from central bureaucracies to the schools and communities themselves.

Public engagement is… just good public relations. People have shied away from using that term, but there's always been engagement in good public relations – listening, not being top-down.

June Streckfus
Maryland Business Roundtable

Perhaps the most far-reaching example of this kind of engagement is found in the **Chicago Public Schools,** where site-based management at all schools was instituted in 1988. Chicago was one of the earliest – and largest – school systems in the country to institute school-site councils and has one of the longest periods of experience with this form of governance. Early analysis partially attributes some recent student gains in reading to the level of parent and community involvement that stems from shared responsibility for school achievement.

More recently, the **Charleston County (South Carolina) School District** has implemented elected school governance councils in all of its schools. These bodies are made up of administrators, teachers, parents, and community members. While the councils are still in their initial stages, the district hopes they will ultimately be responsible for all major site-based decisions, including staff and principal selection, budgeting, and curriculum choices.

As in Chicago, Charleston, and many other districts, site-based governance structures typically mandate parent and community as well as teacher representation. The effectiveness of these efforts can vary widely,

Organizing for School Change

The Alliance Schools Project of the Interfaith Education Fund
Austin, Texas

Serving 145 schools in Texas, as well as nearly 100 schools in New Mexico, Louisiana, and Arizona, the Alliance Schools Project is the largest network of parent and community organizing efforts for public education in the country. The Project is an outgrowth of the work of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), itself a national network of more than forty umbrella groups of religious organizations working to improve life in low-income communities.

Ernesto Cortes, who serves as Southwest Regional director for IAF, puts the Alliance's work in a broad democratic context. "In spite of the racism against African Americans, Native Americans, and others," he said recently at an Alliance conference, "there is an ongoing struggle to claim a rightful place in the American public square. There is a struggle to claim standing, to be engaged in what happens to their children, their families, their homes." Drawing on IAF's substantial organizing expertise, the Alliance Project is taking this struggle for standing – for engagement – into schools.

Where districts or schools invite them, Alliance organizers start by talking one-on-one with parents, teachers, and principals. Small group meetings, primarily involving parents and teachers, then begin to initiate more public relationships between and among these stakeholders. At these gatherings, participants are encouraged to tell their stories, their experiences in schools. Organizers ask a few simple questions, for example, What's important to you? What needs to change? Parent coffees, grade-level meetings for teachers, and house meetings that bring together parents and community members in people's homes broaden the circle.

All of this person-to-person communication, say Alliance staff members, explodes damaging myths held by both parents and teachers, identifies potential leaders, and further builds critically needed relationships. As one organizer at an Alliance conference explained, "You can't establish these kinds of relationships if you don't meet face to face. You can't just dump information on people; you have to listen and identify their interests."

The relationships created in this phase of organizing serve to develop a core leadership team of parents, teachers, administrators, and other school staff. Drawing from their experience in speaking with others in the process, this leadership group then crafts an action plan for the school that is ratified at a school- and community-wide meeting or "action." A site-based management team, comprising educators, parents, and community members, is subsequently chosen through peer elections. The two, and often three, years of organizing that lead to these elections ensure that the management team is dynamic and truly representative and that it serves as a formal mechanism through which all stakeholders can share power, decision making, and responsibility for their school.

In places where IAF has a relationship with a community congregation or where community groups invite them in, Alliance organizers will often begin their work in the community itself, rather than in the school. They will walk door to door, talking one on one with neighborhood residents and listening for their concerns. These issues may be school-related but are just as often about safety or housing or health care. House meetings then build a broader base of support, provide an opportunity for training, and eventually lead to the creation of an action plan. This approach allows the people raising the issues to develop and act on strategies to confront them. And even if the action plan focuses first on cleaning up a dangerous lot or on immunizing neighborhood children, these organizing efforts almost always lead back to the schools.

Whether the work begins in the community or in schools, Alliance organizing often yields significant results. In the late 1980s, the Morningside Middle School in Fort Worth was the worst-performing middle school in the district. Since then, Alliance efforts have raised the number of parental visits to the school, expanded participation in the traditional parent-teacher organization, and increased parental involvement on the school's policy committees. Most importantly, the school now ranks third among Fort Worth's twenty-two middle schools in student achievement.

On a citywide basis, the Alliance-sponsored San Antonio Education Partnership, which represents a group of five Alliance schools, responded to community concerns about the future of its high school graduates by creating a set of new scholarship and job opportunities. In just a few years, the number of seniors maintaining a B average went from 19 percent to 61 percent and the graduation rate rose from 81 percent to 92 percent.

School organizers from as far away as Pittsburgh and Spokane have flocked to IAF's intensive ten-day trainings hoping to emulate the Alliance's success. And according to Alliance staff, word of mouth in and between districts has created an enviable situation for its organization, namely, more schools now want to join the Alliance network than there currently are organizers to serve them.

depending on how those people representing the larger parent and community interests are elected and how community input is sought, valued, and included in decision making. Most councils will grapple at some time with members who have vested interests in the status quo or who are overly eager for rapid change. Yet these structures offer opportunities for new relationships between schools and their communities that might not have been available before, and the process for brokering the needs of schools, students, and parents is an important one. In the best cases (see the story on **Parent Organizing Project,** page 30), council members are part of a dynamic team, participate in a comprehensive process, and are accountable to active and well-defined constituencies.

Public engagement is... a process of educating, organizing, and energizing a community to play the role that only they can play to create really effective schools.

BRAD DUGGAN
Just for the Kids
Austin, TX

Legislation and Policy Development

Often engaging coalitions of business leaders, community agencies, parents, and others, these development efforts work at the state – or, less often, the district – level to develop and pass new legislation or policy. Some of these groups begin by gathering a diverse set of high-profile stakeholders to study education issues and build a climate for reform. For example, the **Public School Forum of North Carolina** was modeled after a blue-ribbon education commission made up of one third elected officials, one third business leaders, and one third educators. However, it quickly developed into a public policy research center that now plays an important convening and advocacy role around equity, teacher recruitment, and other school issues.

Perhaps the best known of the legislative and policy efforts is the **Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence** (see page 28), which generated widespread public support for education reform through hundreds of town forums in Kentucky. In turn, the Prichard Committee helped develop and advocate for the passage of the sweeping Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 and has since served to

Public Engagement as Joint Venture

Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network's 21st-Century Education Initiative
San José, California

In 1992, the business and civic leaders of the Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network convened more than 1,000 people interested in doing something about the region's sagging economy. Fourteen working groups deliberated during a three-month period. Each developed a set of proposals, and all agreed on a single top priority for action: education.

During the next two years, a small board of local business and education leaders studied the issue. A public opinion poll revealed that nine out of ten residents wanted world-class schools, but most felt they didn't have them. Business executives reported a shortage of qualified employees graduating from the area's schools. Other surveys showed that professionals were reluctant to relocate to Silicon Valley and place their children in the public schools. Educators pointed to the low levels of parent and community involvement and decreasing school revenues.

The planning group consciously put aside the blame inherent in many of these findings and decided to work together to spark what it called an "educational renaissance" and create a "world-class educational system." The Joint Venture board agreed to raise more than $20 million in capital and kicked off the 21st-Century Education Initiative in 1995.

The Education Initiative sought proposals from what it called "Renaissance teams," groups of community members and business people paired with educators from a "vertical slice" of elementary and middle schools that fed into area high schools (many of California's school districts are not unified K–12). The Initiative made commitments of more than $1 million over three years, on a venture-capital model; that is, the Renaissance teams did not receive just money but rather a blend of financial, human, and technological resources. Strikingly, executives from Silicon Valley's top firms not only made substantial, $1-million-plus contributions to the Initiative but also agreed to allocate significant portions of their own time on a volunteer basis, as well as to loan some of their managers to work either part time or full time in schools as part of the Rennaissance effort.

"This is not the time for quick fixes," says Ed McCracken, CEO of Silicon Graphics, one of the major firms involved in the project. "It is, indeed, time to understand what's wrong with our current system and make continuous improvement."

To date, the Education Initiative has invested in eight Rennaissance teams. Each has developed a comprehensive, sustainable educational improvement plan designed to impact what every team agrees is the bottom line – boosting student achievement. Each team has also come up with a unifying vision or theme for systemic change with a focus on literacy, math, or science.

A substantial portion of the early work in all eight sites has centered around ensuring that the elementary and middle schools in each vertical slice have the same educational objectives, that the K–12 curriculum is aligned, and that comparable performance standards are set. Developing baseline data to measure student achievement according to these standards, say Initiative staff, continues to be a challenge.

Sizeable donations of computer software and hardware have already led to significant progress improving the communications and technological capacity of the schools involved. For example, an Internet specialist from Intel worked with technical experts from Cisco, 3 Com, and Hewlett-Packard to develop state-of-the-art technical plans with each Rennaissance team. Internet hookups have been created in all schools involved. New, donated equipment has enhanced school officials' ability to troubleshoot problems more effectively. Teachers have not only received multimedia workstations but have also been trained to use computer, laser disc, and video technologies to support instruction and communication.

Today, hundreds of community members, educators, and business people are working with ten school districts and fifty-five schools serving 34,000 students. When fifteen teams are up and running in three years, the Initiative expects to affect one out of every five schools in Silicon Valley.

This energy and commitment has produced improved student achievement in some of the classes and schools involved, but systemic gains for each slice have been harder to identify. No one, least of all the Initiative's leaders, are surprised that Silicon Valley's educational bottom line has not improved overnight. Says Glen Toney, a group vice president at Applied Materials, Inc., and chair of the 21st-Century Education Initiative, "This is just the first step of a signficant journey."

explain the law to local districts and communities and to facilitate parent and community understanding and support for kera's ongoing implementation. This nationally recognized effort has also initiated a series of statewide parent training institutes to deepen local involvement in education reform.

Other efforts use public engagement strategies to resolve desegregation and equity law suits. The **Baltimore Education Policy Network** – comprising education leaders both inside and outside of Baltimore's public schools – worked with the American Civil Liberties Union and others to settle three pending law suits against the district and ensure greater public input on several aspects of the reform plan instituted as part of the suits' resolution. Through this settlement, the Policy Network also advocated for and won the establishment of a Parent and Community Advisory Board for the city's revamped Board of Education, as well as similar Advisory Boards in each of the district's six "areas" or clusters of schools.

In New York, the **Campaign for Fiscal Equity** is conducting a statewide campaign as part of its litigation on behalf of underserved New York City public school students. The process began with a three-part, citywide discussion among more than one hundred representatives of education advocacy organizations, parent groups, students, community school boards, and community-based business, labor, and civic groups. Through these meetings, the Campaign created a draft reform proposal that includes methods for changing the state-aid formula, promoting effective education reform, and ensuring accountability. This statewide process includes fifty local meetings and up to ten regional forums throughout the state. Ultimately, a finance reform plan will be crafted, with broad public input, that will satisfy New York State Supreme Court guidelines and lead to legislative support for equitable financing.

(A chart outlining these public engagement types and their key characteristics appears in Appendix C.)

What outcomes does public engagement seek?

Public engagement initiatives – especially where sustained over time – are achieving a variety of outcomes. They are improving learning and teaching in classrooms; building greater community trust in schools; deepening parent and community involvement; increasing the financial, physical and human resources available to schools; and developing and supporting important legislative and policy reform.

Public engagement is… about the positive rather than the punitive, not blame but responsibility. Those are hard shifts for this society to make.

Edna Varner
High school principal
Chattanooga

None of these achievements, however, is made quickly. Successful engagement initiatives – like all efforts to change complex organizations or institutions such as schools or school systems – take time. They take time because public engagement efforts do not focus simply on the content of school improvement. These initiatives gather – and build relationships with – all the stakeholders responsible for educational progress and create a process to move people toward change. This attention to ownership and process is also a reason that so many people are optimistic about public engagement's potential to yield enduring improvements for schools.

Improved Learning and Teaching

Improving learning and teaching is the most important purpose for any educational change strategy. In some places, public engagement has led to demonstrable and even dramatic progress. Since 1991, for example, when Industrial Area Foundation organizers began facilitating a partnership between dissatisfied parents and the principal at **Zavala Elementary School** in Austin, Texas, the percentage of fourth graders passing the state's writing-proficiency test has jumped from 7 percent to 93 percent. Student attendance has also soared.

Creating a Blueprint for Change

Providence Blueprint for Education (PROBE)
Providence, Rhode Island

In 1991, the Providence Education Fund and the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce commissioned a multiyear, independent study of the Providence public schools. Hoping to raise expectations and public support for schools, the Providence Teachers' Union and the School Department endorsed the study, which was overseen by a thirty-three member commission – more than half of whom were parents. Two years later, the commission released PROBE, the PROvidence Blueprint for Education, a comprehensive look at the schools, coupled with clear, measurable prescriptions for improving them.

As Edward D. Eddy, chair of the PROBE Commission, wrote, the recommendations were "aimed not only at raising expectations but liberating the huge supply of energy . . . for change" expressed by those participating in the study. Indeed, hundreds of parents, teachers, administrators, and others had been interviewed or surveyed, participated in focus groups, or shadowed on the job for a day.

This energy was initially funneled to develop proposals for a new teachers' contract that would respond to several PROBE recommendations for establishing school-based management councils, expanding professional development opportunities for teachers, requiring parent-teacher conferences, and mandating evaluations, with input from parents, for all teachers. PROBE supporters, including scores of parents, went door to door building public awareness about the contract. As a result, 5,000 postcards were received in the office of Providence Mayor Vincent Cianci, who ultimately supported the new contract.

Building from the success of this initial grassroots campaign, PROBE has subsequently focused on using its many supporters to act as a force for keeping schools accountable – not only to the report's recommendations but to the larger public. With virtually unanimous support from administrators and teachers and funded by GTECH Corporation, PROBE sponsored a set of statistical reports – school support cards – in six schools which provided substantial baseline information on school climate and student achievement for parents and community members. Subsequent reports, now involving fourteen schools, are enabling parent and community stakeholders to understand what it will take from schools, educators, and parents to increase school and student achievement. The publication of these reports has also provided opportunities for school personnel to describe more powerfully the work they are doing on behalf of the community's children.

Much of PROBE's recent work has focused on parents. Using stipends provided by the federal Americorps program, PROBE established the Parents Making a Difference program. Fifty-eight parents are now serving as full-time staff for Family Centers in eighteen Providence schools. In addition to providing tutoring, mentoring, and other services in classrooms, these parents have conducted family-needs assessments at their schools, created summer and after-school programs, developed nutrition and parenting skills workshops, acted as mediators and translators between parents and school administration, and provided outreach to parents with truant children. Three of the Americorps parents – supplemented by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation – are working with schools to identify their students' health needs and to develop opportunities to integrate needed health services into the schools involved.

All of the Parents Making a Difference staff have benefited from training from the Right Question Project (RQP) of Somerville, Massachusetts. Through RQP workshops, these parents have developed their ability to ask what the curriculum is about, whether teachers are teaching what children need to learn, whether children are learning what they need to know, and how they as parents can help.

"We believe in the importance of building the skills of individual parents," says RQP Executive Director Dan Rothstein, "to support their children's education, monitor their children's educational progress, and advocate on behalf of their children when necessary." RQP also believes that parents can be effective trainers. In addition to participating in workshops, parents in Providence have done RQP workshops of their own for more than 300 other parents – sometimes in people's homes and even in laundromats.

Bolstered by RQP's training, PROBE's work with parents – as well as its continuing commitment to collaboration with both school and community stakeholders – has created a strong, independent voice for better schools in Providence. "I think that there is a renewed spirit of trust for our work that is driving the participation of everyone – parents, the public, and even teachers – for our work," said Dan Challener, executive director of PROBE. "In the first year of mandated parent-teacher conferences, only a few hundred conferences were held. This year, using our networks of parent centers and community networks to inform parents about the conferences, nearly 5,000 conferences were held. That's progress!"

When student test scores climbed 20 percent in a single year at **John G. Carlisle Elementary School** in Covington, Kentucky, Superintendent James Kemp credited the rise to the district's focus on parent involvement. In particular, he pointed to a pilot community school program, where residents and parents now take part in a variety of programs and services held each evening after school.

Public engagement is... electric when it involves people who are concerned about education but haven't felt they were part of the "system." The loss of a community collegiality about our schools was a concern, and everyone wanted it back.

Barbara Ann March
Parent, attorney
West St. Paul, MN

Thirty miles outside San Antonio in the small town of Boerne, Texas, a group of parents formed the **Hispanic Education Committee** to address community concerns about a significant achievement gap between white and Hispanic students. In 1992, while 73 percent of white students took and passed all three of the state's high school exit exams, only 22 percent of Hispanic students did. After the Committee identified and brought this information to district officials, the school board incorporated a goal in its annual plan to work on this issue (with parents and community members) and close the margin each year. Subsequently, the gap has narrowed, and both groups have improved their performance. In 1997, 55 percent of the Hispanic students took and passed the exams, while 87 percent of white students did.

Engagement changes teaching in substantive ways as well. Because algebra is essential for students to proceed to higher math and science courses, as well as to higher education, long-time civil rights activist Bob Moses developed the **Algebra Project.** This initiative, now found in eighteen sites in twelve states, organizes parents and community members to raise expectations and demand that poor and minority children have access to algebra instruction in schools. Once schools adopt the program, parents are invited into the schools to learn about the Algebra Project's new math curriculum and the innovative teaching methods that make it work.

In Raleigh, North Carolina, the community-based **Latin American Resource Center** (larc) works with local schools, their students, and community members to impact history and other curricula and increase students' understanding of Latin American culture. larc's Dialogo Program provides teacher training, lesson plans, materials, and a traveling art exhibit to help educators infuse their classrooms with new knowledge about Latin American countries and people.

Making Reform Systemic

Santa Monica–Malibu Unified School District
Santa Monica, California

In the early 1990s, the state of California set aside funds for the Santa Monica–Malibu Unified School District (as well as several others in the state) to restructure its system to better serve all students. The district's graduation rate and achievement levels were higher than the state average, but the students not graduating or achieving were predominantly Latino or African American.

When Neil Schmidt became district superintendent in 1992, he had two important ideas about how to confront this issue. First, he believed it was not only educators and school staff who were responsible for finding ways to improve the district's schools: parents, students, city government, and community-based agencies, as well as the general population, had critical roles to play too. Second, he was certain there were no easy answers, that all of these stakeholders would have to join in a sustained "inquiry" – a process designed to examine beliefs and practices that underlie instruction and schooling and allow school and community participants to change their attitudes and behaviors.

Over the last three years, this process has involved a wide variety of activities and constituencies, some not traditionally associated with school reform activities. For example, the Infant and Family Support Project trains parents in the district as Family Advocates who reach out to pregnant women and families with children under age three in their own neighborhoods. The Advocates seek to facilitate wellness activities, connect families with their neighbors and other community resources, and ensure that children grow up healthy and ready to start school.

To involve Latino and, particularly, immigrant parents, the district's Enlace Familiar program – with support from the Mattel Corporation and the Annenberg Challenge – is taking seventy-five families through a three-year leadership-development process. In the first year, the program addresses issues of identity and acculturization. The second year looks at more school-related topics; the third includes training in advocacy skills that encourages parents' ongoing participation in schools. Building on these efforts, the Community Liaison program works in schools with Latino and African American parents to involve them in school programs, address their concerns, and serve as cultural translators for and with school staff.

These parent involvement efforts are supplemented by the Social Justice Series, in partnership with the nearby University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). This series has sought to engage the entire Santa Monica–Malibu community and novice teachers from UCLA through six deliberative public sessions that explore how schools can foster democracy and achievement for all. Each session is anchored in a reading on school reform and student learning – translated into Spanish to facilitate broader participation – and all have provoked substantative discourse and expanded staff and community members' understanding of the race and class issues that underlie much of the achievement gap in the district.

UCLA has also partnered with the district to conduct inquiry sessions among Santa Monica High School students and staff that have looked at race/class questions, math pedagogy, and other issues. UCLA faculty have played a pivotal role in developing a comprehensive assessment plan to evaluate the district's efforts to reduce class size and improve reading.

In addition to UCLA, partnerships with community-based agencies and the city of Santa Monica (which currently provides $2 million of direct funding each year) round out the district's engagement work. Additional city funds support local agencies in providing a range of school-related services to students from mental health and substance-abuse intervention to drop-out prevention, recreation, and job development.

Santa Monica–Malibu's multifaceted efforts to engage its various publics have already yielded results. Community trust and support for the district is strong. During the last two decades, three ballot initiatives to raise revenue for school improvement have passed with more than 70 percent approval from voters. The district's drop-out rate has plummeted from 10 percent to 1 percent. And even with more students staying in school, the student grade-point average in the district has inched up as well. The number of minority students enrolled in advanced placement and higher-level algebra are up, and preliminary indicators suggest these students are performing well.

Part of this success, say district officials, results from a "culture of inquiry," a constant willingness to examine and re-examine how schools are run. "We openly question what we're doing, along with teachers, parents, and the general population," says Peggy Harris, the district's director of educational services. "By looking at the underlying beliefs that drive practice, we can make changes deliberately and systemically. And by getting everyone involved in the inquiry, we believe that the change will stick."

Despite the progress noted here, many public engagement efforts have not yet led directly to better student achievement or more innovative teaching. Initiatives that are only a year or two old are generally unable to point to higher test scores or other signs of progress in students' work. These newer efforts have often focused on process goals (e.g., starting a dialogue about schools or increasing parent/community involvement or trust). Some are just now turning their attention to student achievement and teacher performance. However, most feel that public engagement has created a new "school climate," in which they believe improved learning and teaching is now possible.

Public engagement is… involving the stakeholders for ownership of any type change. After all, it's their schools, their children, their community.

Roger Clough
Superintendent
Pattonville, MO

Greater Community Trust in Schools

Increased community trust is one of the elements of long-term and significant school reform. Building this kind of trust helps to create what David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation has called "a public for public schools," that is, a group of people willing and able to support, work for, and secure the long-term survival of public education.

A wide variety of people – from district leaders to community activists – report that engagement efforts have helped to build trust for schools generally. The practice of making information accessible, involving key stakeholders in all important and particularly contentious issues, and speaking candidly about good news and bad have rebuilt ties between people inside and outside schools. In its most successful guises, public engagement substantially reconstructs the relationship between schools and their communities.

For example, in **Medina, Ohio** (see page 32), district officials engaged a broad range of school and community people and sensitively resolved a potentially divisive conflict over whether a picture of Jesus should be allowed to remain where it had hung in a local elementary school for nearly fifty years. Administrators decided to move the picture to a church across the street and used a series of community forums to address deeper feelings about the erosion of community values that arose during the process. A survey conducted after this decision found that few people had changed their minds on the issue, but that the district's handling of it did significantly increase the community's trust in the school system.

Deeper Parent and Community Involvement in Schools

In addition to building trust, leaders of engagement initiatives point to greater parental and community involvement in the work of their schools. In start-up engagement efforts, this can mean increased turnout for open houses and a more vibrant and effective parent-teacher organization. In Bennington, Vermont, the **First Day Foundation** kicked off the 1997 school year with a one-day event that brought parents into schools to learn more about the local schools' goals and how they could play a more active role in their children's education. This initiative was bolstered by a partnership with 124 local businesses, who gave their employees time off to attend the day's events.

Public engagement is… tied to a particular place and time – and it's personal. As a result, the role of listening is vital and critical; it defines your agenda.

Jack Murrah
Foundation president
Chattanooga

After their initial stages, public engagement efforts point to increased participation in school/community safety programs and greater numbers of tutors and school volunteers. That participation can lead to significant parent and community representation on site-based councils or district curricular and

oversight committees. In the best cases, as in **Pattonville, Missouri** (see page 26), it allows parents and community members to take on a long-term role in school governance and decision making. This deeper involvement expands the capacity of schools to do their work.

Increased Resources

While the public may indicate its support for public schools in surveys, it does not always put its money where its opinions are. In several places, however, public engagement efforts have been instrumental in successfully passing bond levies and increasing the financial resources available to schools. In **West Holmes, Ohio,** for example, a series of neighborhood and town meetings that focused on that rural district's overcrowding resulted in the passage of a $16.8-million bond issue that has paid for the construction of a new high school and eleven new classrooms in the district's elementary schools.

Public engagement is... helping the schools define what it is they need to deliver. As the end place for people in schools, business has a major role to play. Let's define those skills and abilities as a community.

WOODLEY MURPHY
Dupont plant manager
Chattanooga

Nearby **Olmstead Falls, Ohio,** used a similar approach to approve an additional 12.63 mills of property taxes to build a middle school, expand the high school, and increase operating revenue for the district. While both initiatives were initially about increasing revenue, the process used has led to a continuing change in the ways in which the schools and community interact on a range of problems.

Similarly, in **Edmonds, Washington,** district officials turned to a public engagement strategy after a $118-million levy to build and renovate schools was turned down by the community three times. Using focus groups, community forums, and a district calendar that explained exactly how the district spends its money, officials built broad support for the measure. Once voters approved the levy, Edmonds used extensive community input to plan two new high schools and renovate an elementary school. The **Plainfield, New Jersey, Public Schools** (see page 20), as part of a larger public engagement approach to revitalizing its district, passed a $33.9-million bond issue in 1996 to pay for capital and technology improvements. It is interesting to note that of the thirty-two bond referendums on the ballot that year in New Jersey, Plainfield's was one of only two that passed.

Reform Legislation and Policy

Public engagement efforts have been responsible in several states and localities for new legislation and policy designed to improve schools. For example, the **Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education** (mbae), a group of key business leaders from throughout the state, did extensive outreach to many groups, including business and community groups, unions, superintendents, and school committees to help develop their own proposals for school change in a document called "Every Child a Winner." By subsequently helping the legislature draft and build support for reform legislation, mbae not only ensured the passage of the Education Reform Act of 1993 but has subsequently promoted dialogue around how the implementation of the legislation is progressing.

Faced with failed bond levies and severe budget cuts, the **Aurora (Colorado) Public Schools** first used an engagement strategy to pull together a communitywide strategic planning process in 1988. During the last decade, this process has led to several policy changes. A Leadership Council made up of community representatives provides support and direction for the Board of Education. Each school building now has a shared-decision-making group responsible for budget and staffing, among other issues. And when the district sought to rewrite graduation standards, a fifty-person school and community task force studied the issue and held five communitywide meetings to discuss the standards. The Board ultimately adopted the

Task Force's recommendations. As in Aurora, the rationale for many public engagement initiatives in the policy arena is to involve the public up front. In that way, whatever law or guideline is adopted can be assured of a well-established constituency that can help provide for the policy's successful implementation.

Responsible Media Participation

As Americans continue to place education among their top priorities, public engagement is giving the media something to write about quite different from the usual coverage. In some instances, the media itself is pushing public engagement. In Providence, as one example, the *Providence Journal-Bulletin* and nbc-affiliate wjar-tv have cooperated in a year-long series called *Teaching Matters.* They presented a bi-weekly series of articles and broadcast news features on the major issues facing Rhode Island education, covering them through the eyes and viewpoints of Rhode Island citizens – including teachers, administrators, parents, civic and business leaders, students, and the public. The paper and station used extensive public-opinion polling and involved hundreds of people in public forums and focus groups to research the issues covered. The project will culminate in a statewide forum on public education.

Public Engagement Today – and Tomorrow

As this chapter has revealed, much is being accomplished in public engagement today, but the potential for public engagement tomorrow is even greater. The next chapters look at the challenges and opportunities gleaned from these stories and suggest what needs to be done – and who needs to be involved – to build a public engagement movement capable of transforming public education.