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How Does an Engaged Community Improve Student Achievement?

There seems to be widespread consensus that the public has been abdicating its responsibility for public education over the past four or five decades. More recently, Benjamin Barber (1992) described a modern America where rights and obligations have gradually become uncoupled. Continues Barber,

> It [America] is a place where individuals regard themselves almost exclusively as private persons with responsibilities only to family and job, yet possessing endless rights against a distant and alien state in relationship to which they think of themselves, at best, as watchdogs and clients and, at worst, as adversaries and victims. There is apparently nothing government can do right, and nothing markets can do wrong. (p. 232)

When Americans see something in their government that they do not like, their first inclination is to blame their elected representatives. But in a democracy, these elected representatives should bear only part of the responsibility. According to David Mathews (1994), "The responsibilities for defining the public interest, describing the purposes and direction consistent with those interests, creating common ground for action, generating political will, and creating citizens are undelegable. . . . We can elect our representatives, but not our purposes" (p. 11).

Public schools are among the many institutions that have felt the effects of abandoned public responsibility. A recent report by Public Agenda (Farkas, Foley, & Duffett, 2001) on the lack of public involvement in education concludes that "the issue seems to be less a problem of opportunity and more a problem of complacency" (p. 15). In their survey of the general public, two-thirds of respondents said they were comfortable with leaving school policies for educators to decide. Only when people think their schools are performing poorly do they express a greater willingness to become involved. An alternative explanation is offered by David Mathews (1996), who served as the secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in the Ford administration. He proposes that many Americans no longer believe the public schools are *their* schools. Reviewing more than 10 years of research by the Kettering Foundation, Mathews concludes that many recent school reform initiatives (i.e., increased financial control by state governments and professionally established standards) have actually served to further distance the public from its schools. Although many educators focus on ways to improve student performance or to enhance communication with public stakeholders, few are addressing what may be undermining improvement in performance or communication. Mathews writes, "Citizens complain that educators are preoccupied with their own agendas and don't address public concerns about discipline and teaching the basics. This lack of responsiveness is part of what convinces people that the public schools aren't really theirs" (pp. 3–4). Americans don't see the public schools as agents for creating a better society; instead, they focus on how public

schools will meet the needs of *their own* children. Mathews posits that community development must precede school reform. In other words, there must be a *public* before there can be *public schools.* If we focus on public life in our communities and encourage more responsible citizenship, then we have laid the necessary foundation for true school reform.

Harvard professor Robert Putnam (2000) echoes this concern for a declining sense of community in America. He notes a serious decline in social capital, which refers to "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19). Putnam bases his conclusion on trends that include declining political participation, lower levels of participation in organized religion, and fewer memberships in clubs and community associations. Building on Putnam's work, the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America, 2001), completed in late 2000, compared 40 communities across dimensions of social capital. The survey addressed two dimensions of "social trust" (trust of others), two measures of political participation, two measures of civic leadership and association involvement, a measure of giving and volunteering, a measure of faith-based engagement, a measure of informal social ties, a measure of the diversity of friendships, and a measure of the distribution of civic engagement across social classes within the community. Survey results, along with a more detailed description of methodology, can be found at: *http://www.cfsv.org/communitysurvey/results_matrix.html.*

It would certainly appear that social capital is a multifaceted concept and that the United States has seen a recent decline in most of the indicators used to describe social capital. But why have we seen this decline over the past several decades? Using a vast amount of data collected over the past 25 years, Putnam (2000) has concluded that four main factors are responsible for the decline in social capital:

- Pressures of time and money, especially in dual career families, that work against community involvement

- Suburbanization, commuting, and sprawl
- Privatization of leisure time through electronic entertainment, such as the television
- The replacement of the long civic-minded generation (born between 1901 and 1924) by their less involved children and grandchildren

An educator may find this decline in social capital of general interest but could be tempted to ask, "How does this affect my school?" In his book, Putnam reports a correlation between social capital and student performance. Social capital is highly correlated with student scores on standardized tests and the rate at which students stay in school. He offers some possible explanations for why social capital has such a marked effect on educational outcomes. First, in communities where there are higher levels of social capital, teachers report higher levels of parental support and lower levels of student misbehavior. There seems to be a sense of connectedness and accountability associated with social capital. Another reason why students may perform better in communities with high levels of social capital is that they watch less television. There is a negative correlation between the average amount of time that kids spend watching television and the average level of adult involvement in the community (Putnam, 2000). It appears that children are drawn into more productive uses of leisure time in communities where the levels of social capital and public involvement are higher.

Research over the past 30 years has verified that when families are involved with their children's education, children do better in school and the schools they attend are better (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Family involvement means children attend school more regularly, demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviors, complete more homework, earn higher grades, receive higher scores on standardized tests, graduate from high school at higher rates, and are more likely to enroll in higher education. Henderson and Mapp (2002) recently completed a literature review of 51 studies that

examined the impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement. The research they reviewed confirms the value of family involvement in improving student achievement, but the evidence also points to the important role that communities play in the education process. Henderson and Mapp (2002) reported that community organizing resulted in "upgraded school facilities, improved school leadership and staffing, higher quality learning programs for students, new resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum, and new funding for afterschool programs and family supports" (p. 57). They note that high levels of parent and community involvement are among the important factors that characterize high performing schools. Clearly, family and community involvement play a role in helping students achieve their full potential. For more detailed information regarding specific studies on the relationship between family/community involvement and student achievement, consult the Web site for the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools (*www.sedl.org/ connections*).

The fact remains, however, that social capital has seen a decline in recent decades. Americans appear to be less involved in civic activities and feel "less connected" to one another. They feel less committed to public institutions. Public schools have felt the impact of a less engaged public in the form of reduced parental involvement and declining community support for public education.

WHAT IS PUBLIC, OR COMMUNITY, ENGAGEMENT?

Certainly, the public bears some of the responsibility for their lack of engagement with public schools. But educators must also make an effort to reach out to their constituencies in order to encourage engagement. Currently, the public is characterized as disenfranchised at worst, complacent at best. The effort to reach out does not mean more public relations but a genuine attempt to hear what the public has to say by involving

them in dialogue. The Annenberg Institute has defined "public engagement" as "*a purposeful effort, starting in either the school system or the community, to build a collaborative constituency for change and improvement in schools*" (Annenberg Institute, 1998, p. 16). The National School Boards Association defines "public engagement" as "*an ongoing, collaborative process during which the school district works with the public to build understanding, guidance, and active support for the education of the children in its community*" (Resnick, 2000, p. 1). (It should be noted that although earlier work makes use of the term "public engagement," "community engagement" is the term now preferred by educators to describe these efforts.) Both of these definitions incorporate what the Annenberg researchers identified as the five shared characteristics of public engagement initiatives (Annenberg Institute, 1998):

1. An inclusive and dialogue-driven process

2. A dedication to making meaningful and long-term improvement in schools

3. A commitment to creating dynamic, two-way partnerships

4. Sincere efforts to find common ground

5. An atmosphere of candor and mutual trust

To further understand what is meant by community engagement, it is perhaps useful to understand what community engagement is *not.* Mathews (1996) makes a clear distinction between an "engaged public" and a "persuaded populace" (p. 39). A "persuaded populace" is the desired result of traditional public relations efforts. As Mathews notes,

> public relations efforts can persuade people and gather support for good causes, but they can't create genuine publics. Publics are formed when people decide, among themselves, to live and act in certain ways. Making these decisions together gives their choices legitimacy and moral force.

Deborah Wadsworth, executive director of Public Agenda, stresses that community, or public, engagement is much more than informing the public or persuading them to believe as the experts do. According to Wadsworth (1997), "Public engagement presupposes a much more collaborative process in which individuals and groups think through issues together in a struggle to arrive at solutions they can all live with" (p. 750).

All definitions of community engagement seem to incorporate the concept of collaboration. But what is collaboration? How is it different from other strategies for working together? Arthur Himmelman (1994) sees strategies for working together on a continuum of complexity and commitment. "Networking," the most basic strategy, is defined by Himmelman as *exchanging information for mutual benefit*. "Coordinating" is defined as *exchanging information and altering activities for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose*. "Cooperating" is defined as *exchanging information, altering activities, and sharing resources for mutual benefit and a common purpose*. Finally, "collaborating" is defined as *exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources, and enhancing the capacity of another for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose* (Himmelman, pp. 1–2). Each party in a collaborative effort is committed to helping its partners become better at what they do. Collaboration requires substantial time commitments and very high levels of trust, and it is characterized by extensive areas of common turf. Another term for community engagement might be Himmelman's notion of "collaborative empowerment," where empowerment is defined as "*the capacity to set priorities and control resources that are essential for increasing community self-determination*" (p. 3).

Regardless of the differences in terminology, it is clear that community engagement (or collaborative empowerment) involves much more than the traditional one-way communication flow from schools to the public. In *Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change,* the Annenberg (1998) research team describes how communication efforts differ from engagement efforts on a number of different dimensions.

COMMUNICATION	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 decision-making stakeholders
goals/strategic plan	values/vision
products	process
public relations	public engagement

It must be acknowledged that the process of community engagement carries some risk and requires educators to think about sharing decision-making power in nontraditional ways. An involved public can be threatening to those educators who are accustomed to unchallenged authority (Kimpton & Considine, 1999). It is hard work, requiring time, patience, and persistence. If educators do not understand the long-term benefits of community engagement, some may feel that they cannot afford the time commitment. Others may fear that people will be too critical of the schools and will not understand enough about the problems that educators face (Jennings, 1997). They may have had negative experiences with "the public," especially when encountering special interest groups. They may worry that the public will want to become involved in decisions that are best left in the hands of

school faculty or staff. They may fear any loss in power. Still others may feel powerless themselves in the face of externally imposed reforms (Mathews, 1996).

Whatever the reasons for the discomfort, there are well-respected voices within the education community that argue for greater inclusion. Michael Fullan (2000) advises educators to "respect those you want to silence," (p. 159) because they may have important information and insight. "Move toward the danger in forming new alliances, instead of withdrawing and putting up barricades. . . . Boundaries of the school system have been permanently permeated" (p. 160). Seymour Sarason (1996) asks,

> Does it make sense to talk about schools as if they are part of a closed system that does not include groups and agencies outside that system? Why is it that when we use the phrase "school system" we think in terms of pupils, teachers, principals, school buildings, boards of education, superintendents, etc., and we automatically relegate other groups and agencies (e.g., parents, finance board, politicians, schools of education, state and federal departments of education) to an "outside" role? (p. 10)

He goes on to warn that those educators who overlook factors outside of the traditional "school system" will be less likely to achieve the desired consequences of their efforts. A former executive director of the American Association of School Administrators provides a more blunt version of the same message:

> We are going to be dead in the water if we don't find a better way of dealing with the public. For a whole variety of reasons, we have lost the public in many of our communities. . . . The public is going to end up supporting a lot of crazy ideas that are going to be disrespectful of the schools if we don't find more powerful ways of reconnecting the public with the schools. (Houston & Bryant, 1997, pp. 757–758)
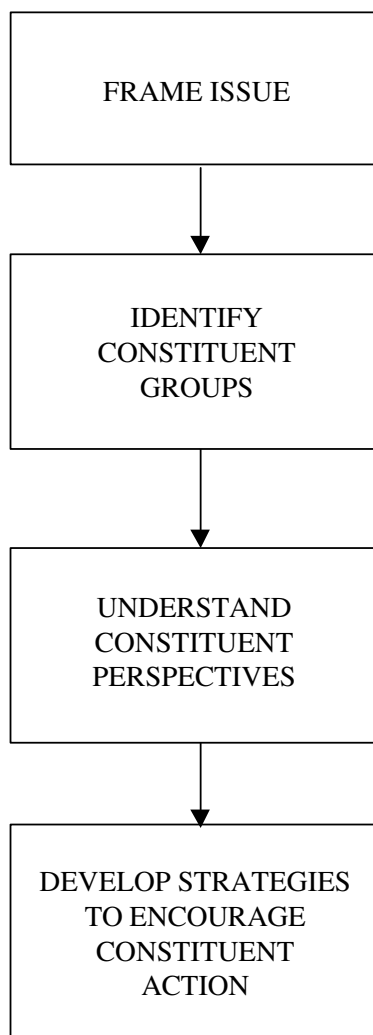
HOW DOES THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS WORK?

There is no common blueprint for community engagement initiatives. Each school within each community will need to consider the specific characteristics of their situation to design a process that will work. Some of these considerations will include the complexity of the issues to be addressed, the level of trust that exists in the community, the extent of any organized opposition to or support of existing initiatives, the level of emotion associated with the issues to be addressed, the cost associated with these issues, and the time and budget available for the community engagement process itself. This may seem to be overwhelming at first, but a thorough situation analysis must precede the design of any community engagement strategy. Although adopting a "cookie-cutter" approach may seem desirable on the surface, a customized design is the best way to ensure successful community engagement.

Even though each school's plan for community engagement may be somewhat unique, there are some distinct phases that commonly characterize successful community engagement processes. They are represented in the framework that is shown in Figure 1.1, which will also be used throughout the remainder of this book.

Successful community engagement initiatives have a clear focus. Ultimately, improved student achievement is the goal of community engagement, but there are many routes to that final destination. For some school districts, a clearer sense of purpose and a strategic plan may be the necessary starting point. Other districts may need to start by addressing funding issues. Still others may need to begin by discussing the standards used to assess student achievement. Whatever the issue, community engagement initiatives need a focus. Chapter Two presents the issues that are most appropriately addressed by the community engagement process.

Because public schools serve numerous and diverse constituencies, care must be taken to include representatives from

Figure 1.1   A Framework for the Community Engagement Process

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│  DEVELOP STRATEGIES     │
│   TO ENCOURAGE          │
│      CONSTITUENT        │
│         ACTION          │
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each of these constituencies in the community engagement process. Many school districts start by building a coalition of change agents representing these constituencies, who serve as a "planning team" for the process. Chapter Three addresses the task of identifying constituent groups.

Once constituent groups are identified, the next step is to develop an understanding of the varied perspectives that

characterize these constituent groups. A variety of research and discussion techniques are available to facilitate sharing of different viewpoints. The idea here is not to persuade others but to understand them. Martin Marty (2001) makes an important distinction between "conversation" and "argument," which is worth noting at this point. Conversation is guided by the question and argument by the answer: "The movement in conversation is questioning itself—not confrontation, not debate, not an exam." Conversation requires respect for others, the willingness to listen, the acceptance of conflict, and the ability to change one's mind if the evidence supports a different position.

Thus, participants must avoid the temptation to rush to answers and action before an adequate foundation of trust and common understanding is in place. Mathews (1996) echoes this sentiment that publics must be reconstituted before they can be reconnected to the schools for the purpose of action. In other words, people must feel more connected to one another before they can begin the tasks of strategy development and implementation. Mathews notes that purity of intent is a critical factor in community engagement initiatives.

> Efforts to involve citizens, though well-intentioned and sincere, sometimes unwittingly treat the public as a means to ends that educators have in mind. . . . The public is not a means to the ends of educators, and people know it. They react adversely to many of the techniques used to involve them; though educators intend to empower, people feel manipulated. (p. 28)

If, after being asked for their opinions, the public believes that they have not been heard, the resulting damage is greater than if educators had proceeded without any public input. Chapter Four summarizes the techniques available for soliciting these opinions.

The fourth and final phase in the community engagement process involves strategies used to call constituents to action.

The desired action will differ depending on the circumstances; it may involve getting parents more involved in their child's education, building partnerships with community organizations to support schools, or encouraging voters to support a levy referendum. School districts that have experienced a successful community engagement process describe the energy that builds along the way (O'Callaghan, Jr., 1999b). Quantum theory can be used to characterize community engagement because the concept of critical mass is so important. The energy begins with a small group of people and spreads to a much larger group over time. Once the entire system is engaged, the possibilities for action are limitless. Chapter Five presents an array of strategies used by public schools to encourage constituent involvement and action. (The final chapter, Chapter Six, is not part of the framework for community engagement but will summarize the previous four chapters that do discuss this framework.)

HOW DOES "COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT" HELP SCHOOLS?

This is truly the "bottom line" for educators. We know that community engagement is a *long-term* process designed to build commitment to and involvement in schools. The process will differ, depending on the unique characteristics of each school or district wanting to implement the process. We also know that there is risk in relinquishing some decision-making power to the public. Some educators have described efforts to engage the public as similar to dancing with a bear. You never know quite what to expect, and you dance until the bear decides it is time to quit. So why should school or district administrators be interested in community engagement?

First and foremost, a more engaged community results in improved teaching and learning. With support and understanding from the public, teachers feel less like scapegoats and more like professionals who are empowered to do the best possible

job for *our* students. As members of the community, all of us have responsibility for educating our young people. "Teachers" are found outside of the classroom, in addition to those professionals within the classroom. The National School Boards Association has prepared a case study report documenting improved student achievement in response to public, or community, engagement initiatives in 15 different school districts (Saks, 2000). Educational research over the past 30 years has provided support for the claim that family and community involvement in schools has a positive impact on student achievement (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 1994;). Chapter Two will provide more detailed examples of successful community engagement initiatives along with documentation of results. Keep in mind, however, that it is somewhat naïve to expect that community engagement initiatives will guarantee significant measurable improvement in student achievement in one or two years. More likely is the scenario in which process outcomes (i.e., more dialogue, greater trust) will be evident in the short run, with improvements in student achievement coming over the course of several years.

So what kinds of process outcomes might educators expect as a result of a community engagement initiative? Certainly, greater levels of community trust in schools can be expected as one outcome. Also, school districts benefit from broader and deeper parent/community involvement in the schools when the public is engaged. This can be seen in more support for student learning at home, better attendance at school conferences and open houses, and more volunteers for all aspects of a school's functioning.

Time is not the only way in which the public indicates its support of schools. In recent years, changes in school funding formulas and continuing budget squeezes have sent districts asking for more money from voters. Across the country, community engagement initiatives have been instrumental in gaining voter support and increasing the financial resources available to schools, as we will see in Chapter Two. And, in

some states, community engagement efforts have been the catalyst for the development of new policy and legislation to improve schools. For example, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE), a group of state business leaders, helped the state legislature to draft and ultimately pass the Education Reform Act of 1993 (Annenberg Institute, 1998). On a more local level, the public schools in Aurora, Colorado, used a community engagement strategy to bring suggestions for policy changes to the Board of Education. A 50-person task force, composed of school and community members, studied the district's graduation standards and made recommendations to the board that were ultimately adopted.

Clearly, the outcomes from successful community engagement efforts are varied. This is due, at least in part, to the different purposes that community engagement efforts are designed to address. All have improved student achievement as their ultimate goal but may address different factors that influence achievement, such as greater parent and community involvement, increased funding, or standards development and implementation. Each of these is a legitimate focus for community engagement activity. The next chapter provides guidance on how to frame the issue for a community engagement initiative. Examples of successful initiatives are presented, along with the issues addressed and the results generated, where available. Key characteristics of successful community engagement initiatives will also be highlighted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 1

1. Given the definition of community engagement presented in this chapter, how would we evaluate our school's/ district's efforts to engage the public? What are the strengths and weaknesses of our current approach? Do these efforts fall more into the category of public relations or community engagement?

2. For our community, how would we describe the current level of public involvement in improving student achievement? Which groups of citizens are most involved? Least involved?

3. What is our vision of a community that is fully engaged in the improvement of student achievement? How does this compare with our current situation?

4. How might time and financial resources be made available for future community engagement efforts?