

The Lack of a Public for Public Schools

BY DAVID MATHEWS

THE PUBLIC schools are becoming dangerously disconnected from the public. That's the gist of a recent report I wrote for the Kettering Foundation, based on more than 10 years of research on this deteriorating relationship.¹ The research forces me to say something I never believed I would say — or even think. The public school system, as we have known it, may not survive into the next century. If public schools mean no more than schools responsible to lay boards and paid for by tax revenues, they may not mean much at all. Their very legitimacy is at stake.

The Nature of the Disconnect

I want to distinguish the problem of *legitimacy*, which isn't being addressed, from the problem of *effectiveness*, which everyone is talking about. Institutions face a loss of legitimacy when those who created them no longer believe that the institutions are their agents, acting on their behalf. The compact joining the agency and the agent is broken. That is exactly what is now happening to the public schools, and they aren't the only institutions having this problem today.

If you haven't thought of legitimacy as a major problem, consider this: What do site-based management programs, vouch-

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ers, charter schools, home schools, private schools, and state takeovers of "bankrupt" systems have in common? They all have to do with the control of education. There are evidently a great many people who don't believe that the public schools are their agents, who don't believe that the public schools are responsive to their concerns. So they are creating their own schools, trying to take back the schools, or putting someone in charge who will make schools respond to their priorities.

As many citizens see it, the public schools are no longer *their* schools.² Research supported by the Kettering Foundation has found that, despite a long tradition of thinking of public education as a sacred trust, Americans today are halfway out the schoolhouse door.³ Even though 40% to 70% of respondents to polls of the public indicate allegiance to local schools, this statistic tells only half of the story, masking an erosion of the historical commitment to the idea that these schools belong to everyone and that they serve a public purpose in addition to benefiting parents.⁴ "Completing the great work of the Revolution" was the way we once described that purpose. Although Americans still cling to the ideal that we should have schools open to all, the broad mandate that once tied these institutions to this and other social, economic, and political objectives has lost its power to inspire extensive commitment.

Beyond Restoring Confidence

While other institutions (government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, even the press) have recognized and begun to deal with their loss of legitimacy in the public's eyes, the discussion in edu-

cation remains fixed on the effectiveness of the schools. Even though there is every reason to have that discussion, it is dangerous to ignore the problem of legitimacy. Like a crack in the foundation of the public school system, the lack of legitimacy is a structural defect that undermines all the good work to make the schools more effective.

I understand why the charge that the schools are ineffective has sparked a renewed effort to restore confidence in them. It is a natural response. But I doubt whether that confidence will be regained as long as people feel that the schools aren't really *theirs*. Institutions that lack legitimacy in the public's eyes do not generally enjoy high levels of public trust.

The breakdown of the compact that has joined the public and the public schools may be one reason for the more obvious problems — dissatisfaction with the performance of the schools, difficulties in communication between administrators and the public, and lack of citizen involvement. While these are all serious concerns, deterioration of the commitment to public education calls for more than improving test scores, doing a better job of communicating, or what is usually implied by "engaging the public."

Restoring legitimacy to the public school system will require rewriting the compact with the public, which will, in turn, require a public that can define its interests. If the public's interest was once "completing the great work of the Revolution," what is it today? Or, rather, what are the various interests of the public? We never decide them all together or all at once. We make our choices community by community and issue by issue, as we respond to pressing problems like reform-

ing welfare, curbing drug abuse, and stemming the tide of juvenile crime. That is how we define the public's interests, which are the necessary foundation for the charters we give our schools.

The usual techniques for increasing "community involvement" or "citizen participation" aren't going to revalidate the compact with the public. I see a great many efforts these days to garner support from individuals and to call it "public support." While these campaigns may pass a levy or authorize construction bonds (no small feat, to be sure), they don't coalesce what I would call a public — *a diverse array of citizens constantly joining together (albeit in temporary and ever-shifting alliances) to decide on and advance their shared interests, the interests of the community as a whole.*

One of the principal reasons that campaigns to "engage the public" don't go far enough is that there is often no public waiting to be engaged, waiting to provide legitimacy, waiting to rewrite a compact with the schools. Given that situation, school reform has to be recast as "public-building." The focus has to be on the community rather than on the schools. In other words, certain things have to happen in our communities before we can see the improvements we want in our schools. It is unlikely that schools will change unless communities change, unless citizens become an effective public by increasing their capacity to band together and act together.⁵

Make no mistake, we cannot have genuinely public schools without the kind of public I am talking about. Schools have to have not only popular support but also public capital, a form of social capital that consists of habits of solving problems and working together. Public capital is institutionalized in certain kinds of community-building, boundary-spanning organizations. It "funds" the public action that schools need in order to reinforce their institutional objectives — action to combat problems that originate outside classrooms, for example.

Publics have to be created and re-created out of a multitude of self-interests, which don't always include an interest in schools. One of the problems in starting off community conversations with the subject of school reform is that it can leave out those whose concerns are elsewhere. There may be a connection between what

these people think is important and the mission of public schools, but they need an opportunity to find that connection for themselves. They are unlikely to be impressed with lectures on the importance of public schools to democracy.

This is why I believe that overcoming the loss of legitimacy will require nothing less than rechartering our public schools, locating their missions in the interests of

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the public as a whole. To derive school mandates from the public's purposes, I hasten to add, is not the same as making the school all things to all people. It is to find the larger public purpose in the basic work of schools — teaching young people.

Public-Building Practices

How do we build a genuine public? Practices for doing that aren't hard to describe. One of the more obvious ways is for people to start making choices together about the kinds of communities they want, choices that define the public's interest.⁶

Private individuals become citizens by making decisions about the issues that most concern them and affect their common well-being. Making common choices is work that, if done well — that is, with due deliberation — cultivates a sense of public responsibility. We feel more responsible for

what we've participated in choosing than for what has been chosen for us. Choices also make public action possible; we can't work together until we decide what to work at. Most of all, making choices together identifies the shared or interconnected purposes that join people as a public. The fate of any community is determined by the choices people make (or refuse to make). So public-building is, in its most basic form, doing "choice work." Schools find their charters, their purposes, and, ultimately, their support in choice work.

Another Way to Think About the Public

What can educators do to promote this kind of public-building? Burdened as they are with the problems inside schools — under the gun to improve test scores, maintain discipline, and fulfill no telling how many other mandates — it is not obvious to them what more they can do. Even if educators could turn all their attention to the task, in the final analysis, citizens have to create a public; professionals can't do it.

Yet people who have dedicated their lives to public schools can't just sit by and watch. Hearing the findings from our research can chill the souls of those whose hope for the future is in public education. Educators ask for models to emulate, examples to follow. Unfortunately, even if we had such models and examples, I don't think they would solve the problem.

What is needed — desperately needed, I believe — in order for educators to understand the role they can play in public-building is a different way of seeing the public, a way of seeing more than what usually meets the eye — a mass of citizens who have to be persuaded, a body of interest groups that have to be placated, or a constituency that has to be served. Rather than models, imagining other roles requires an expanded mindset. Because mindsets are learned through careful reflection on new experiences, I don't offer any examples or how-to formulas. I wouldn't, since imitating is the antithesis of learning. Different experiences with the public can lead to different perspectives, which can point to new possibilities for revalidating the compact between the public and the schools. Those possibilities restore hope.

Here are different ways educators are experiencing the public. Harris Sokoloff

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of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania conducts an annual summer institute on community choice work.⁷ The objective is to add a genuine public voice to what are otherwise only the voices of special interests, each convinced that its concerns are separate from the concerns of others.

In partnership with civic organizations like the scouts, the public library, and, interestingly, the local newspaper, some school districts have tried forums that require serious choice work. They like the response they are getting and are planning more forums on community issues that are school-related (juvenile violence, for example) rather than school-based. In the process, the educators are having a different experience with the public.

The alliances of schools and civic organizations are more than window dressing. Educators, as citizens, have to make common cause with other citizens. I have heard that this is already happening in Wisconsin, with encouragement from the state affiliate of the National Education Association, and I have seen a cooperative program at work in Birmingham, Alabama, for over a decade. There, Peggy Sparks and Wanda Minor, educators who are also active citizens, have made deliberating about public issues a civic habit through more than a decade of community forums called National Issues Forums.⁸ The Birmingham forums help school officials renew their mandates by maintaining strong ties to neighborhoods and their objectives. That is public-building, and, while not done to create support for schools, it nevertheless enriches them and helps them to be truly public.

What exactly is the choice work that the Birmingham forums practice and that the institute at the University of Pennsylvania (along with 20 other institutes around the country) teaches? Neither discussion nor debate, choice work is a quintessentially public activity. It is careful deliberation with others about a range of options or ways of approaching difficult issues, such as how a community can support troubled families. Should the community try to revive traditional values through special programming on local television? Or

maybe the better choice would be to place more responsibility on parents by punishing those whose children break the law. If these options aren't acceptable, perhaps the most effective thing would be to expand family assistance by putting more money into social service programs. Although this is not a school-based issue, its implications for schools are considerable.

Notice that options aren't the same as solutions; they are strategies. And they are not polar opposites. I have just described three different approaches to strengthening the troubled American family. Each option is based on something that people consider valuable — moral order in the community, parental responsibility, and assistance to those in need. Yet arguments can be made for and against each strategy. Even those who favor one approach may be faced with costs or unexpected consequences they wouldn't like. Options may conflict with or undercut one another. Someone will doubtless argue, for example, that outside assistance can become outside interference and undermine parental rights. So choices have to be made.

People make choices best when they carefully weigh benefits, costs, and consequences, along with the views of others. That is what deliberation is — “weighing” carefully. It increases the chances that community decisions will be sound, that initial reactions will become more reflective and shared “public judgments.”⁹ And it helps communities decide what serves their interests. Deliberation is the means by which publics form. And being in deliberative forums gives educators the experience of being in the midst of publics aborning.

Deliberative forums don't necessarily result in consensus on one particular action; that isn't their objective. Still, as these forums in many communities have demonstrated, they can produce an agenda for a range of actions tied together by a shared sense of purpose and direction. When people join as a public, when they have a community of interrelated purposes, and when they begin to make decisions to shape their future, they inevitably turn to educational as well as political measures to carry out those decisions. Education, in its

broadest sense, is a means for shaping the future. And when citizens think about all the educational institutions at their disposal, they inevitably look to the schools as one of those institutions.

This is how public schools have always acquired legitimacy through public mandates, and it is the way their mandates must be renewed today. It is the first step on the long road back to relocating the public schools in the public domain, to making them once again *our* schools.

1. This article is based on that report, *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* (Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation Press, 1996).

2. The feeling of people that they “own” the schools is not the same as local control of schools. The first is a communitywide perception; the second is a legal arrangement giving a group of educators and citizens authority over certain financial and curricular decisions.

3. The Harwood Group, *Halfway Out the Door: Citizens Talk About Their Mandate for Public Schools* (Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation, 1995).

4. Stanley M. Elam, Lowell C. Rose, and Alec M. Gallup, “The 28th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1996, pp. 45-46.

5. I want to emphasize that I don't think of a public as only those well-intentioned folks who are concerned solely with the common good. I explain the concept of the public that informs our research in *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Voice* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

6. For other public-building practices, see chapter 4 of *Is There a Public for Public Schools?*; and David Mathews, “Another Way to Name Problems and Frame Issues: Another Way to Do Politics,” in *1997 Annual Report* (Denver: National Civic League, forthcoming).

7. Harris Sokoloff, “A Deliberative Model for Engaging the Community: Use of Community Forums Can Undercut Special-Interest Politics,” *School Administrator*, November 1996, pp. 12-18.

8. The Birmingham effort is part of a nationwide network of several thousand civic and educational organizations that have made deliberative forums part of their programs. The network also includes schools that use the forums to teach the skills of making decisions together. For more information, write to the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI), P.O. Box 75306, Washington, DC 20013-5306, and ask for the booklet “Making Choices Together,” or write to the National Council for the Social Studies, 3501 Newark St. N.W., Washington, DC 20016.

9. For more on the distinction between popular opinion and public judgment, see Daniel Yankelevich, *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991). ■