

School Boards and the Power of the Public

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We Americans have an abiding belief in and commitment to the principles of democracy. Those principles are exhibited in our relationship with government and in our daily interactions with one another. The shared knowledge of those democratic principles is necessary for our society to function, and so is their practice. Simply put, the active engagement of the citizenry gives life and meaning to civil society and to our democracy.

Remarkably, the three hundred million people in our vast nation share many common values that define the complex rights and responsibilities of contemporary civic life. Yet the ability to successfully negotiate the complexities of civic life is not innate. It must be taught and experienced. Where do we learn these principles? Where do we practice them and experience their application? And how do we learn to value the necessary investment of time it takes to become engaged citizens?

For many young people, school is the most significant public institution in their lives, simply because they spend so much of their time there. The public schools are therefore well situated to give students a deliberate and organized foundation of core civic principles. The schools shape students' sense of civic identity through the lessons of history, student

government, team activities, and students' daily interactions with each other. They are taught that the principles of democracy apply equally to everyone, regardless of race, religion, or economic status.

The schools' role in teaching the principles of American democracy and the value of civic engagement is especially vital because of the significant number of students whose families come to the United States from countries where the premises and practices of civic life may vary from our own. It is also important because, although other community organizations can provide some motivated young people with opportunities for civic engagement, the schools can reach all children with programs and activities that engage students in community service and impart an awareness of citizen responsibility and a sense of the public interest.

The schools frequently provide adults with their first major opportunity to be involved with public institutions. In their roles as parents, taxpayers, and businesspeople, adults can get involved in decisions about what values to teach, what courses to offer, where to locate a new school, or whether to close an existing one. They may also get involved in broader decisions about the role of the schools in community life, economic development, and even issues ranging from traffic to health services and safety.

Citizen involvement in the local schools can serve both community life and participatory democracy. Vibrant civic engagement is also vital to the success of public education—and to the public's ongoing support of it. The advice and volunteerism of parents, business leaders, and other citizens can enrich the academic quality of our public schools and strengthen the schools' ability to prepare students to participate in American society. And through their involvement citizens can gain a better understanding of public education and its unique role in a free society.

Local school boards are a key mechanism in the mutually dependent relationship between education and democracy, a relationship that is played out through civic engagement. That is, beyond representing the community as elected officials, members of local school boards, as we shall see, can actually increase democratic participation by inviting citizens from the community to become more involved in the schools and empowering citizens to participate in the decision-making process. Through that engagement citizens' support for education can be strengthened. At the same time, they get a close-to-home opportunity to learn and practice democracy. Such experiences can lead to participation in other venues—and provide a powerful model for the next generation,

as children watch and learn from their parents' civic involvement. For these reasons, *what* the schools do to include citizens and *how* they do it will shape public education's contribution to advancing democracy and community life.

Why Community Engagement Matters to Schools

An engaged public is important to the success of our schools for several reasons. It enables teachers and school officials to understand what parents believe is really important when it comes to what children need to know and how it should be taught. It goes without saying that academic learning is the school's primary mission, but a school is also a social environment in which most children spend six hours a day, 180 days a year. How happy their children are in school, the values they learn there, and the services they have access to are also important to parents and will strongly influence their support for the schools.

By engaging the broader public, school leaders can determine how the schools are perceived by those who, whether they are parents or not, have an interest in the schools as taxpayers, homeowners, and business-people. In most communities today, as many as 75 percent of households do not have school-age children. Their day-to-day interest in the local schools is not as direct or as personal as that of parents, but their perspectives are important. Not only will they vote on school budgets and other issues, but they will also interact with public school graduates as their neighbors, colleagues, and employers.

According to polling data from Phi Delta Kappa and the National School Boards Association (NSBA), the public wants schools that can provide well-rounded students who are prepared for college and the workplace.¹ But responding to national polling data is only a starting point for school systems wanting to connect with the public. Local school systems can go further to give their own communities the schools they want to match the life they envision for their children and for the broader society. Across the country a growing number of school systems are bringing the public into organized dialogues to create a vision for the local schools by addressing the big questions: What do we mean by an "educated student" in our school system? What do we want our students to know and be able to do? What values and attributes of character do we want them to possess? What do we want daily life in our schools to be?

Community engagement around such questions provides the schools with a sense of direction from their primary constituency. Without public

input, these questions are often answered in terms of how policy specialists, interest groups, and others define the purposes and priorities of public education. Often these experts are primarily concerned with how they can hold the schools accountable for meeting specific goals, which usually means emphasizing areas of student learning that can be easily and uniformly measured.

That focus may narrow the schools' mission to performance on specific tests, which in turn may narrow the curriculum. Less time may be spent on developing the skills of civic engagement and democracy, on music and art, and on areas of character development that cannot be measured in ways assessment specialists and policy analysts accept as valid. But is that how community members want their children to be prepared for successful careers, family life, and citizenship? If schools do not engage the public, the mission of the schools—what they do, what they hold themselves accountable for—may become disconnected from the very constituency they are intended to serve.

In addition to helping set a vision for the local schools, the community can help ensure that expectations are met and the vision becomes reality. For example, in a Maryland program called What Counts? local school boards, working with their state association, hold kitchen table conversations to ask citizens what they value most about public education. Members of the public then explore the indicators *they* believe should be used to measure success; these may include everything from graduation and college placement rates to parent involvement to even the percentage of students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses.

In discussion groups like these, members of the public can also review the measures of success established by the state or other external agencies. Likewise, they can be involved in answering such questions as: Where do we go from here? How do we improve? Addressing these questions will lead to others: What resources do we need? What can parents do to support these improvement efforts? By engaging the community in this way, the schools are more likely not only to serve their constituents' desires successfully but also to build people's understanding of and support for the job the schools are doing. Acting on this scale requires citizen engagement far beyond a vote on taxes or a bond issue. It means recognizing and operating public education as a democratic institution.

The NSBA's publication *The Key Work of School Boards Guidebook* shows how school boards, as the elected governing authority for the local schools, can involve the community every step of the way to establish a vision for the schools, adopt standards that define the level of perform-

ance expected, hold the school system accountable for achieving those standards, and ensure continuous improvement to meet the district's vision and goals.² Engaged citizens bring much more to the school system than simply letting school leaders know what is important to the community. Members of the public can contribute ideas for improving the quality of education and then volunteer their time and expertise to support the education program and the activities in their schools. Although parents and others may be well versed on specific issues—especially those that involve their own children—they may not understand the big picture or the context in which a specific issue operates. Convening the community around school issues in a town meeting or a focus group gives people an opportunity to develop a broader view.

Through such activities community members can become more interested in—and gain a better understanding of—the higher mission of the schools, the challenges they face, and the successes they achieve. People who have taken part in such forums are also more likely to understand others' needs and points of view and to support decisions that can accommodate multiple concerns and the broader public interest. An engaged community, in short, is more likely to develop a deeper understanding of public education and its role in a diverse society.

In addition to helping determine how best to educate students, the community can provide insight into how the schools can best serve children and adults in other ways—for example, by becoming the neighborhood center for after-school care, adult education programs, or social services for children and families. Not only does this form of community engagement bring citizens, local government agencies, and civic service organizations together to improve the quality of life for everyone, it also defines the school as the seat—if not the heart—of neighborhood activity.

Why Engagement in the Schools Matters to Communities

Communities have a significant interest in their public schools because of the central role they play in determining their children's future. The schools also play an important part in determining the community's overall economic vibrancy and quality of life, since the caliber and range of services offered by schools will influence housing values, property taxes, and which businesses and workers choose to locate in or leave the community.

The public schools play an important though less obvious role in cre-

ating a sense of community. We live today in a 24/7 world of work, with many other priorities competing with an active civic life for our shrinking spare time. In recent decades, meanwhile, our values have shifted to place greater emphasis on individualism over the collective good. In many localities the amount of active engagement in the community at large—especially in local government activities and the political process—is diminishing. As the climate for citizen involvement is weakened, so too is our commitment to public institutions, including the public schools. And as people become separated from the decisions made by their public officials, they can become alienated from or indifferent to their government, thereby weakening the democratic process itself.

The public schools are attractive vehicles for keeping the public engaged in government and focused on the public interest. The reason is simple: the schools involve people's children. They also are more likely than most other government institutions to involve discussions and activities in which people can have a real impact, either as ordinary citizens or in their own more specialized capacities.

The schools have an advantage over most other government agencies by being close to home—it is a good deal easier to attend a meeting at your neighborhood school than at city hall, and state and federal governments are even farther away. In addition, people are likely to be familiar with the schools from their own or their children's experiences. When it comes to offering their views, many people believe they know more about education than they do about most other government functions.

Because schools are important to so many parents, taxpayers, and businesspeople, then, and because they have the capacity to convene the public, schools can play a major role in bringing individuals and community groups together to address crucial educational issues. In doing so, schools can bring citizens together to work for the common good, breathing new life into the processes of civic engagement that are essential to a participatory democracy.

A Community of Communities

When school boards convene the community around school issues, the individuals involved frequently have their own particular areas of interest and expertise. Indeed, some engagement activities may involve certain people precisely because of their specific interests. They may be leaders of civic organizations that provide community services, such as the Ki-

wanis; they may represent specific groups, such as homeowner associations; or they may lead student activities outside school, such as boys' and girls' clubs or scouts. They may be business leaders who have an economic interest in the schools or specialists who can provide professional advice or assistance—architects or psychologists, for example.

Communities are filled with people whose knowledge and talents can offer much to make the schools both more efficient to operate and more rewarding for students. Retirees and members of civic groups can serve as mentors for youngsters in at-risk situations, for example. The local parks and recreation department can provide facilities and resources for after-school programming. Other public or private institutions—such as church groups, libraries, museums, local universities, community colleges, and city or county service agencies—can also contribute to the educational program, the well-being of students, and the overall effectiveness of the schools.

Every community also has certain individuals who can be brought into the engagement process because of their unique capacity to build broad public support or to pull the community's social levers to make specific plans a reality. These "rainmakers" include such people as the mayor, the local newspaper publisher, or a local philanthropist. Engaging local civic and business leaders is especially important because they can use their networks to reach individuals the school system is unlikely to be able to reach directly. A school initiative aimed at improving the reading skills of low-achieving students, for example, can benefit from the involvement of business, civic, and church leaders who, in turn, can encourage their own employees or members to read to their children or to serve as volunteer tutors.

Increasingly, school districts are encouraging the creation of local foundations to help support individual students with college scholarships and to provide funding for school-based programs or program enhancements (such as career education) that might not be otherwise available. In addition to raising money, the boards of these foundations can be a rich resource for generating ideas to improve the schools, contributing to the curriculum, and developing broader public understanding of and support for the school system.

Deciding whether to convene local people in their capacity as ordinary citizens or because of their special knowledge or position is a strategic consideration. So is deciding how to bring them together. In the 2000 publication *Communities Count: A School Board Guide to Public Engagement*, the NSBA showed school leaders how to match community engagement activities with their specific needs, how to build a strategic

engagement plan, and how to implement specific engagement activities, such as study circles.³

School leaders can also promote citizen involvement by supporting other local organizations and working with them to improve the overall quality of life in the community. By forging partnerships with local - museums, theaters, and historical societies, for example, school leaders can open learning opportunities for their students and bring these institutions to the attention of students and adults alike, thereby increasing attendance and participation. Similarly, school leaders can offer vital perspectives on such issues as economic development and housing and can increase citizen participation in discussions about them.

How School Boards Engage the Public

A closer look at the concept of elected school boards and their governance function will show what they bring to the engagement process. One reason we have elected school boards is so that decisions affecting children and the school environment are shaped and approved by people who represent the community. In addition to being the school system's policymakers and governing authority, school boards hold superintendents accountable for managing the schools. School board members, in turn, are themselves accountable to the public. In effect, elected school boards are the way by which the public schools belong to the public.

When the school board becomes involved in community engagement, people know that the effort is being directed by their elected leaders. They also know that their elected leaders have access to the system and will, with the recommendations of the superintendent, make policy decisions based on the public discourse that takes place. In other words, when school boards engage the community, people know that their involvement counts and that decisions will be based on a wide range of views.

A school board's capacity to engage the community extends beyond the formal actions the board may take. Indeed, local school board members engage the community as individuals every day in their personal lives, serving as a unique set of eyes and ears attuned to the schools and the public alike. They talk with parents about their children, meet with reporters, address local clubs, and bring together citizen groups on a wide range of issues concerning the schools and their impact on the community. In effect, school board members connect what the school system is doing with what the community expects for young people in

general and for individual children in particular. This is constituency representation at a personal level, a level that truly counts for individuals.

How well a school system engages the public and how the public believes its involvement will be received depend on the school board's policies and the priority it places on community engagement. It also depends on the overall climate of welcome and accessibility that the school board establishes and on its day-to-day engagement with constituents.

In addition to informal engagement, a school board conducts formal and highly focused activities that take citizen involvement to a higher level. Through these structured activities the community can help to shape the basic mission of the schools by asking crucial questions: What do community members want their children to know and be prepared to do when they graduate from school? What services do they want their school to provide? What kinds of curriculum and extracurricular offerings should be available beyond the required subjects? What size should classes be? What special qualifications should be expected of teachers? What values, character traits, and twenty-first-century skills should their students possess? And what do the schools need to look like and do on a daily basis to fulfill their mission?

The public can be formally engaged to help identify and solve—and ultimately to assume ownership of—a wide range of issues, from raising graduation rates to school construction, from the academic program to drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and sex education. The list goes on. There is no one best way to engage the public, but a number of proven practices merit discussion for what they contribute to the school system and, ultimately, to the democratic process.

Study Circles. Study circles bring together small groups of people to meet with a facilitator and members of the school staff on multiple occasions to address a complex issue, such as narrowing the achievement gap between different groups of students. These are substantive, structured meetings that involve studying documents, discussing points of view, and working as a group to develop recommendations. One Arkansas school board, for example, working with its state association, organized study circles on student achievement and family involvement. The groups' recommendations led to initiatives such as workshops designed to help parents assist their children in managing their homework assignments.

Focus Groups. A focus group meets once to consider and react to a specific issue. Unlike a study circle, the focus group is designed not to de-

velop well-reasoned solutions but to take the temperature of the community on proposals or practices. Unlike polling, which is individualistic and private, focus groups involve a facilitated discussion that can change opinions. Through the discussion, members of the focus group can come to understand other points of view and consider the question at hand in greater depth. Focus groups can provide the school district with important feedback on school programs, advice on communicating with the public, and help in designing more broadly based engagement activities such as town meetings and polling.

Similarly, some school systems use focus groups alongside other strategies to involve the public. That was the case a number of years ago in Fairfax County, Virginia, when school leaders conducted surveys, voice polls, and focus groups to gauge community opinions on budget issues. Results of the process included a review of teacher compensation, a renewed focus on school-business partnerships, and increased staff development on technology.

Town Meetings. Town meetings offer school boards an opportunity to hear from a broad sample of the public and to engage in dialogue with participants. Because these are much larger gatherings, they are not facilitated like focus groups, nor are they structured to evoke layers of thinking or, necessarily, to identify group consensus. Nonetheless, town meetings provide an opportunity to hear varying points of view from individuals and representative groups, such as parent and civic organizations.

In addition, town meetings often draw media coverage that reaches an even wider public. The resulting community input can build support for future planning, as it did in Woodstock, Illinois. Faced with rapidly growing enrollment, this suburban district held a series of town meetings that attracted some 2,400 people. Called SchoolTalk200, the initiative led to a major facilities plan that voters approved by a wide margin.

Polling. Polling can also be used to obtain a sense of the community, although it is not deliberative and is therefore less likely than face-to-face gatherings to evoke thoughtful feedback on issues the respondents have not previously considered. Polling has several benefits, however. It provides a more statistically representative set of data than a town meeting, which may represent only the views of those folks who are sufficiently energized about the agenda issue to show up. What's more, simply posing questions to people who may otherwise not be involved at all is an opportunity to stimulate their thinking and sends the message that

the school system values their opinion enough to ask. Posing the right questions can also help the school system identify issues that resonate with the community. In one New Jersey school district, for example, a poll about school facilities gave voters a forum for expressing their concern about the effect of air quality on students' health.

Virtual Dialogues. School board members can also engage the public through radio call-in programs that invite individuals to bring their thoughts and questions to public attention. Although for listeners this is a one-way channel of communication, it nevertheless identifies problems and concerns in a way that is more unfiltered, challenging, and personal than simply reading a school newsletter or the local newspaper.

Increasingly school leaders are using other avenues of public dialogue as well: audio conferences, e-mail chats, and blogs, such as the one formerly maintained by the president of the school board in Buffalo, New York. As a result of the growing number of communication vehicles, more people are being brought into the civic dialogue. When they can air their own concerns and make their own interests and ideas heard, they may be inspired to take the next steps in active public engagement.

But in order for civic engagement to be successful—especially when people are being brought together in one physical location—the process must be accessible. Location counts, and so does meeting at convenient times. Creating an atmosphere that is welcoming, conducting discussions that are positive in tone, and using language that is clear and easily understood are all equally important. People are more likely to be constructively engaged when they know their views are being listened to and when the responses are not defensive or obfuscated by professional jargon.

Successful engagement with the schools can be accomplished, but whether the activity is a one-on-one conference or a town hall meeting, it will require a deliberate effort to ensure that the public believes that the school system is accessible and interested. When the engagement is not viewed as genuine, participants who came to a meeting with neutral feelings toward the schools may leave with more negative attitudes—and no desire to engage the school system again. When community engagement activities are designed to address citizens' concerns in ways that make them feel comfortable, as well as to achieve the school system's purpose, the level of understanding and buy-in will be substantial. And when that happens, the school board is governing on a public scale.

A Living Democracy

Governance through the electoral process is the very foundation of American democracy. With 96 percent of the nation's ninety-five thousand local school board members chosen at the polls, citizens have no greater opportunity to be candidates for public office than running for a position on the school board. Moreover, because school districts generally represent a smaller population base than do other local governments, individual citizens have greater access to their elected school board members—and greater confidence that action will be taken as a result of communicating with them.

Some will claim that the relatively light voter turnout for school board elections—especially those held separately from general elections—indicates that elected school boards are not essential to advancing democracy. To that argument we say a better approach is to focus on voter turnout, not only in these elections but in American elections generally. Why not work to increase voter turnout overall to strengthen our democracy rather than use low turnout to argue that elected representation is not a necessary cornerstone of democracy?

But this discussion is about more than voter turnout at elections. Election Day is the culmination of a process that extends over months in which candidates talk to potential voters, debate one another, appear in various public forums, and have their views aired in the media. School board elections provide an opportunity for individuals, groups, and whole communities to focus on their schools and to select the candidate they wish to empower to represent them. Even the 4 percent of school board members who are appointed may go through a public vetting process in which candidates lay out their goals before parent groups and civic organizations. These bodies then convey their recommended choice to the locally elected officials who make the appointment.

As an institution, the school board also plays several other important roles to advance citizen self-government. Because a school board member generally represents a smaller number of voters than do other local and state officeholders, the cost, campaign organization, and political experience needed to run for public office are far less formidable. As a result, far more citizens can participate in the democratic process of running for public office. The overwhelming majority will return to private life after serving on the board, bringing their experience as policymakers and government leaders to other facets of civic life in which they may become engaged. For the relatively few who go on to seek another office, their school board experience provides a constituency base and public

record on which to run for an office they might not otherwise consider attainable.

School boards also advance civic engagement and democracy through the way they govern. Typically school boards have seven members, although many larger systems have nine or eleven. As a result, board decisions are based on a majority vote following public deliberation rather than on the executive fiat of one person sitting alone in an office. The deliberative, public, and majority-driven nature of school board decision making helps to ensure that proposals will be well thought out, that varying points of view will be considered, and that compromises and accommodations will be made.

School board deliberation is not based solely on an exchange of views among members, especially when it comes to decisions on major educational priorities or policies affecting students' daily lives. Such decisions often follow individual conversations with constituents, public hearings, or town hall meetings conducted or attended by the entire school board, individual board members, or the administrative staff on their behalf.

When a major decision must be made—on reading strategies or dropout prevention, for example—school boards are most effective if they engage the community to understand its needs and values, take advantage of its knowledge, and gain its support for implementing the decision. Simply stated, effective school boards govern on a public scale, serving the larger public interest while sustaining the individual's commitment to participation in civic activities. The result is a living democracy.

Further, as the governing authority of local school systems, school boards can determine how democracy and community involvement are taught in their schools. Working with the superintendent, the board can evaluate current programs and decide on the appropriate emphasis and allocation of resources. Because teaching in this area can involve personal values, local culture, and activities outside the classroom, many school boards invite parents, civic organizations, and others to provide recommendations and serve as volunteers to help implement programs. Many school districts, for example, are working with local organizations to provide community service programs for high school students. Involving the public in such endeavors improves the quality of the school program and strengthens public support for it, and such involvement gives people an opportunity to renew their own interest in community engagement.

Teaching Students about Democracy

In recent years, the federal No Child Left Behind Act and state accountability systems have sharpened the focus on closing the achievement gap in essential skills like reading and math. More attention is also being paid to providing higher levels of math and science instruction to better prepare students for twenty-first-century technology, global competition, and multiple careers. As important as these efforts are, it is also essential that all students be prepared to live in a civil society in which people know how to get along with each other, value and balance the greater public interest with their own, and participate in the well-being of their community. Only in this way can we ensure that self-governance is a reality, not simply a myth to hide governance by an elite few.

Teaching living democracy reaches beyond having students memorize democratic principles and learn about important historical events that exemplify or model those principles. It involves classroom activities that teach students the values, behaviors, and expectations of life in their community—including their own responsibilities as citizens. Teacher-guided experiences in resolving conflict, student government, group projects, extracurricular activities, and class discussions can all be ways to enable students to understand and practice the elements of life in a democracy.

The importance of schools' serving this purpose was underscored by Peter Levine in "Learning and Democracy: Civic Education," an essay in the fall 2006 issue of the *Kettering Review*.⁴ Adults are more likely to live democracy, Levine noted, if they experience its attributes as children—regardless of their exposure as adults. At the same time, seeing their parents and other adults engaged in the schools reinforces children's sense of community, their desire to become engaged citizens, and their sense of self-worth—including their sense of the importance of their education.

The public schools are the ideal vehicle for teaching about democracy. For one thing, their commitment to fair play, justice, equality, civic engagement, and the public good is not tempered by any specific religious, social, or economic mission. Further, because they admit all students, the public schools can offer students an opportunity to experience democracy as an interaction with a diverse, inclusive student body—not just students of one particular group or socioeconomic class.

When the public schools cease to play a leading role in preparing students to live in civil society—or when the public ceases to see the schools performing that function—the role of public education itself is

diminished. At the present time some politicians and citizen groups are promoting other means of education, such as private school vouchers and cyberschools. These efforts may serve some individuals, but they are not designed to serve all students—nor, necessarily, to foster democratic principles, provide accountability to the broader community, or serve the larger public interest. It has never been more important for citizens to get involved in the public schools and to demand that civic participation become a meaningful component of their children’s education.

A Case in Point

We claim that community engagement can strengthen public education and invigorate our democracy. It would be fair to ask, “What might success look like in practice?” To answer that question, we turn to the imaginary Springvale school district, which enrolls 7,500 students in a community of 30,000 people. In 2002 the school board saw some trends emerging that were causing tensions across the school system.

On the east side of town, more students were moving in from lower-income backgrounds—including children from Central America with limited English speaking and academic proficiency. Many of their parents were concerned that their children were not learning the basics and ultimately were at risk of dropping out. Despite those concerns, some parents felt uncomfortable even coming to school to meet with teachers to discuss the education program or their own child’s progress.

On the wealthier west side of town, parents were concerned that their children were not being offered adequate honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Further, at the three schools enrolling students from both sides of town, there was growing concern from west-side parents that the overall climate of their school was becoming less focused on academic achievement because of increasing enrollments from the east side. Some parents were talking about redrawing attendance lines or sending their children to private school.

Meanwhile, business leaders were concerned that a school board study calling for additional programming to be phased in over several years would result in property tax increases that could limit local consumer spending. They began running an ad campaign, with a special appeal to the 75 percent of households with no children in school, criticizing the schools and the increased taxes. The school and tax issues spilled over into debates before the zoning board and town council over where to locate low-income housing and whether to offer tax reductions to attract

businesses requiring higher-skilled and higher-income workers.

In viewing the situation, the school board saw a school community and town becoming more divided about their goals and less willing to address common interests. If the school board quietly voted on a staff proposal to phase in funding to meet the need for additional programming, not only would the disaffection among parents and taxpayers be likely to grow, but the energy needed to make things happen simply would not materialize.

The school board determined that it needed a plan to go to the public—not to sell a specific solution but to involve constituents in setting a vision for the school system and to participate in a process to identify needs and provide input into program proposals and measures of progress. The school board would also involve constituents in a process of reflecting on their own role in supporting the education vision they helped to create.

The process started with a series of town meetings in which individuals presented their aspirations and concerns for their children's future, - including their beliefs about what the schools should do to prepare their children, their appraisal of the current instructional program, and their concerns over the climate in the schools. Based on what was said, several focus groups involving parents and the general public were convened to gain a deeper understanding of the community's education goals, its perceptions of the needs, and what citizens would be willing to do to work with their children or the schools in general.

With this public input, a broadly based advisory group of concerned citizens and civic leaders was established to work with school officials to develop their vision and expectations for the school system. They also examined the challenges they faced and reflected on their own role in achieving success. This effort included several representatives from a group of business leaders—including the publisher of the local paper and the owner of the local radio station—who, at the school board's request, met monthly to identify their goals for the school system in relation to the economic growth that they envisioned for the community at large. The school board then conducted a series of workshops to discuss the community's goals and expectations and developed a plan of action that the school system, including the board itself, would be accountable for achieving each year through a community review process.

The plan of action called for educating the "whole child" by providing all students with a wide range of courses, including music and art, as well as character development and values. Some of the measures of success were tied to the reading levels among lower-achieving students,

two- and four-year college acceptance rates, AP course taking, reduction in student fighting, and enrollments in science and foreign languages.

To achieve these goals, additional programming, including summer school, would be made available for lower-achieving students and English language learners. At the same time, science offerings and Advanced Placement courses would be expanded. With these new programs and adequate parent and community participation, citizens hoped that some of the long-standing divisions would be mended and the antipathy toward the schools—including those schools serving a diverse enrollment—would be replaced by widespread enthusiasm and support.

Indeed, civic, religious, and business leaders increasingly came to value the goals developed for the schools and take ownership of them. They developed a public campaign encouraging parents who worked for them (or belonged to their organization) to support their children's studies. They also helped sponsor mentoring programs for volunteers to tutor students whose parents could not offer them the support they needed. Several employers provided flexibility to enable their employees to attend teacher conferences during work hours.

The local media covered the process. For example, the radio station ran public service announcements to promote the town meetings and reinforce parent participation. It also conducted a series of call-in programs with representatives of the school system and the participating groups to discuss the challenges and goals of the school system. Business leaders formed a foundation to strengthen the system's career awareness program and to help parents with limited education to become better teachers of their children.

Leaders from the school board, the business community, and several civic organizations met with the town council to explain their action plan and to show widespread community support for it. As a result, the council amended the town's economic development plan to promote the community's commitment to the schools as a means of attracting business.

For each of the next four years, the school board and community worked together to evaluate the goals, the progress made, and satisfaction with their participation. During the intervening school board election, an informed community voted for candidates on the basis of how they would address the larger issues involving the direction of the schools. But Springvale's success with community engagement in local government was to face a new challenge from the federal and state levels.

Specifically, in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) estab-

lished a federal framework to hold schools accountable for students' scoring "proficient" on their state's reading and math tests. Accountability would extend to include the performance of specific groups of students, such as those living in poverty or those who were limited in their English speaking ability.

Although parents and school officials were satisfied with the progress being made by immigrant students at Springvale's two middle schools, not enough of those students were able to meet NCLB's proficiency requirement—especially given the influx of new students over the previous three years. As a result, there was concern that the state might eventually take over these schools or require that they be totally restaffed—despite the public's support for the principals and their confidence in the teachers. For the 2006–2007 school year, school officials proposed to double the amount of class time that lower-achieving students would spend on reading and preparation for state tests—while reducing their instructional time for social studies and canceling their participation in music and art. To pay for after-school tutoring, plans to expand the honors and AP program would be canceled at all schools.

Initially, the community asked: Were the schools failing? Was the curriculum being narrowed? Was the district abandoning its mission of educating the whole child? The media picked up on these issues, and the school board began to see a renewal of the old tensions. Consequently, the school board decided to hold a series of forums to discuss these developments.

Because the community was so involved in the schools, it quickly became clear that the federal and state levels had a different set of goals than the ones they had developed and to which they were committed. They felt that NCLB was constructively challenging them to rethink the expectations they held for their children's education by requiring them to consider the issues in a context beyond their local area. However, they also felt that the federal and state officials who were implementing the federal law—and who never set foot in Springvale—were forcing their school system to move in the wrong direction. Moreover, they claimed, the federal officials did not create this program with the real-world facts of the Springvale school system in mind.

Recognizing that their state and federal lawmakers had only one vote, Springvale's community and school leaders nevertheless invited them to a town meeting to show how NCLB was failing to serve their community. As a result of that meeting, the lawmakers in attendance recommended to the congressional education committees then in the process of reauthorizing the law, that Springvale's plan be accommodated.

While not all communities were as broadly engaged in their schools as Springvale, many did become more involved when the federal program identified their schools as falling short. They too determined how best to make the educational improvements they felt were needed and to challenge their state and federal lawmakers when they felt the program was not representing their goals or reflecting the judgment of their schools' leaders.

Across the country, members of Congress were hearing from a broad range of local constituents about the same concerns that the citizens of Springvale expressed. Through these locally based conversations they recognized that, in passing the law, they had become disconnected from their constituents in establishing this national education program. In reauthorizing NCLB, Congress would address the local concerns raised with the law.

In this scenario we saw how citizens and local groups came together to advance the common good. By being active participants—rather than spectators—in democracy, Springvale's citizens were able to play a role in shaping their community and the decision making of their local government. They heard from individuals with different goals and priorities for their children. They saw the importance of achieving accommodation and consensus in building support for the action needed to advance their own interest and that of the larger community. Springvale's citizens were better informed on the issues when they went to vote for the school board candidates to lead their school system. They also were able to bring their elected officials from all three levels of government in sync with their concerns, priorities, and solutions and achieve a representative voice in policy decisions.

The Power of the Public

Public education and democracy are linchpins of our free society. How well they thrive and support each other depends largely on the civic intelligence of community members and their involvement in civic life—including their involvement in the local schools. Clearly, the public schools have a vital role to play in society. That role is enhanced when members of the community see the contribution that education makes to furthering democracy through the lens of their own firsthand experience of engagement.

The schools' role in cultivating civic intelligence is enhanced when they consciously teach the lessons of democracy and expect students to

engage in its practice. Community service, for example, can teach students to value the larger public interest. By preparing students for life-long success, the public schools hold the future in trust. To fulfill that trust, they must pass on to the next generation the values of a free, egalitarian society.

Only by inviting the community to help answer the big questions about what counts can the public schools give their constituents the kind of education they want for their children. When school boards and other school leaders engage the power of the public, the schools and the schoolchildren are enriched by the community's knowledge, resources, and energy. When they engage their community, the institutions of both public education and representative democracy are strengthened. At that point, school leaders are truly governing on a public scale, and the schools are truly the public's schools.

Notes

1. National School Boards Association/Zogby International Poll, April 2003. See also Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "The 38th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 88, no. 1 (September 2006): 41–56.

2. Katheryn W. Gemberling, Carl W. Smith, and Joseph S. Villani, *The Key Work of School Boards Guidebook* (Alexandria, Va.: National School Boards Association, 2000).

3. Michael A. Resnick, *Communities Count: A School Board Guide to Public Engagement* (Alexandria, Va.: National School Boards Association, 2000).

4. Peter Levine, "Learning and Democracy: Civic Education," *Kettering Review* 24, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 32–42.