


Just Waiting to Be Asked?

Welcome to
Parents' Night

Regents Exams 98-03
Regional Middle Schools



**A FRESH LOOK AT ATTITUDES
ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

Funded by the American Federation of Teachers, the Annenberg Institute, The George Gund Foundation, the National School Boards Association and the U.S. Department of Education

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ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

**A report from Public Agenda
By Steve Farkas, Patrick Foley
and Ann Duffett, with
Tony Foleno and Jean Johnson**

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ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues. Public Agenda's particular expertise lies in crafting research studies that explore different points of view with empathy and that probe beneath surface responses to capture the public's concerns and assumptions. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Our citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision makers across the political spectrum. Our Web site, Public Agenda Online, provides comprehensive information on a wide range of public opinion and public policy issues.

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INTRODUCTION

Though hardly a household phrase, public engagement has become a relatively popular enterprise in recent years—especially in education circles. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform, the National School Boards Foundation, the National Education Association (NEA) and the Public Education Network (PEN) are national organizations that have dedicated themselves to public engagement efforts.

Naturally, different organizations will have different things in mind when they talk about public engagement, but some common themes and assumptions emerge. Advocates of the practice typically believe that the relationship between the public schools and the public is fraying and needs to be invigorated. They speak of the need for educators and administrators to listen and respond to the concerns of parents and residents. They use language that calls for greater collaboration between educators and community members, whose values and input should help set the broad policy direction of school districts.

The Promise of Public Engagement

Public engagement holds out the promise that reforms will be more likely to succeed if the public's concerns are heard and addressed. It promises that districts locked in bitterly partisan politics can break out by reaching out to citizens who have a broad rather than particular agenda, a pragmatic rather than ideological mind-set. The general public may add perspective and calm to the process and nudge self-interested parties toward cooperation for the greater good. Finally, it promises that if the public is invited to have more say over what schools should look like, more people will once again recognize them as the public's schools, as something worth supporting.

The promises of public engagement certainly sound worthy and resonate with traditional notions of democratic values and practices. But key questions abound. How do different groups define public engagement? How much of a priority is it? Do district leaders—

school board members and superintendents—believe it can work on their home turf? Just how receptive are members of the general public, parents and district leaders to public engagement? What attitudes might allow one to anticipate resistance or support? Are there attitudes or assumptions that tend to derail public engagement initiatives or offer overlooked opportunities?

The Scope of the Research

Just Waiting to Be Asked? A Fresh Look at Attitudes on Public Engagement attempts to disentangle thinking in this sometimes complicated realm. The study summarizes the results of surveys of education insiders

(superintendents, school board members and teachers) and of parents and the public at large. Public Agenda, a nonprofit research organization that regularly reports on public attitudes on major policy issues, designed the surveys following a series of one-on-one interviews with experts and decision makers with different points of view on the topic. It continued with focus groups with teachers and members of the general public. Three questionnaires were then developed and fielded with randomly selected national samples: one with 686 superintendents and 475 school board members; another with 404 public school teachers; and another with 809 members of the general public, including a subsample of 205 parents of public school children.

Advocates of public engagement typically believe that the relationship between the public schools and the public is fraying and needs to be invigorated.

Since public engagement is a broad and multifaceted set of ideas, every effort was made in the surveys to explain and personalize the issue for respondents. The surveys asked a series of concrete questions about their own districts, experiences and preferences, rather than gauging general attitudes about the term “public engagement,” or about public schools in the abstract. The research was sponsored by: the American Federation of Teachers; the Annenberg Institute for

School Reform at Brown University; The George Gund Foundation; the National School Boards Association; and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.

For Public Agenda, *Just Waiting to Be Asked?* is the latest of more than a dozen opinion studies on public education conducted over the last decade. This body of research has examined a wide variety of educational topics, including student achievement, academic standards, safety and discipline, integration, accountability, parental involvement and bilingual education, among others. During this time, we have looked closely at the views of the general public, parents, teachers, students, employers and college professors, along with those of key subgroups such as white, African American, Hispanic and foreign-born parents.

Enriching this formal research is Public Agenda's own involvement in dozens of education-related public engagement projects over the last half-dozen years. These community-based projects aim to stimulate more thoughtful, inclusive discussions of schools—discussions that reach beyond parents and teachers (as important as they may be) to include students, local employers, college faculty, senior citizens, “empty nesters,” the religious community, taxpayer groups and law enforcement. We have helped launch meetings in more than 50 communities nationwide, from San Jose (CA) and Las Vegas (NV) to Dubuque (IA), Hattiesburg (MS), Bridgeport (CT) and Gray (ME). These real-life discussions give us regular feedback from individuals in diverse communities with very different points of view on how the country's schools are working.

Plenty to Talk About

As public schools wrestle with far-reaching change, and as districts nationwide confront controversial issues ranging from standards and testing to discipline and safety, many have become convinced that public engagement is now more important than ever. A wide range of groups both inside and outside the field of education have taken on the task of bringing people together and getting the conversations started. Many organizations have active programs helping district leaders, community groups and others start their own public engagement initiatives, and many have issued helpful publications describing how to launch, manage and evaluate such efforts.

The goal is to analyze the predisposition of key players—superintendents, school board members, teachers, parents and nonparents—and to better understand the obstacles that public engagement may face.

Not a Recipe Book

But this study is not a step-by-step “how to” guide on conducting public engagement, nor does it evaluate ongoing initiatives. The goal is to analyze the attitudinal predisposition of key players—the school superintendents, the school board members, the teachers, the parents and nonparents—and thus to better understand the opportunities and obstacles that public engagement efforts may face. The lessons learned may be more relevant than ever.

CHAPTER ONE: THE LAY OF THE LAND

Contrary to conventional wisdom about frayed relations between school districts and their communities, few school board members and superintendents say their districts contend with antagonistic or unhelpful organizations representing business, senior citizens or religious groups. On a similarly positive note, most say that internal bickering among district leaders is the exception rather than the rule. But their interactions with the public are more problematic. The school board meeting—the most conventional vehicle for public input—seems to serve mainly as an opportunity for community residents to gripe. There are also concerns that the schools are most responsive to vocal parents and that—unless there’s a crisis—nonparents rarely pay attention to the schools.

Far Less Interest Group Involvement in Education

The conventional wisdom holds that school districts nationwide are beset by business groups carping about fiscal mismanagement in the schools, resentful senior citizens groups revolting against property taxes, and extremist religious groups challenging the morality of what schools teach. Such stories are undoubtedly true for some districts, but most school board members and

superintendents in this study say it is not the case for their districts.

The majority of school board members (74%) and superintendents (66%) say that in their districts there are no organized business groups that take positions on school policies such as spending. Even greater majorities—82% of school board members, 86% of superintendents—say their districts have no organized

Cooperation Is the Rule

How would you characterize relations between the following groups in recent times:

Percent saying relationship is “mostly cooperative”	Superintendents	Board Members
Between school board and superintendent	87%	77%
Between parents and teachers	84	64
Between superintendent and teachers	83	59
Between business community and school district	76	66
Between local media and school district	72	62
Among school board members themselves	69	68
Between organized religious groups and school district	65	51
Between senior citizens and school district	54	42

Note: The percent saying “mostly contentious” never rises above 11%. See Table 5.

senior citizens groups that take positions on school district policies.

Business, Seniors and Religious Groups Generally Helpful

What's more, when business or senior citizens groups do address themselves to education issues in districts, they seem to be trying to help. Board members and superintendents who do have an organized business group overwhelmingly report that these groups give donations, have active partnerships and volunteer in schools (77% and 88%, respectively). Most board members and superintendents describe relations with organized business groups as mostly cooperative (66% and 76%, respectively).

Stories of “the religious right” taking over school districts notwithstanding, when religious groups are active in districts they also tend to be seen as helpful, according to district leaders. Nearly two in three superintendents (65%) and 51% of board members say relations between organized religious groups and their school districts are mostly cooperative—hardly any say they are mostly contentious (2% and 3%, respectively).

School leaders say that organized senior citizens groups are few and far between. But there is an image of retirees

with fixed incomes upset at paying property taxes for public schools they do not directly use. Do seniors stand out as a unique voting bloc with particularly hostile views toward the schools?

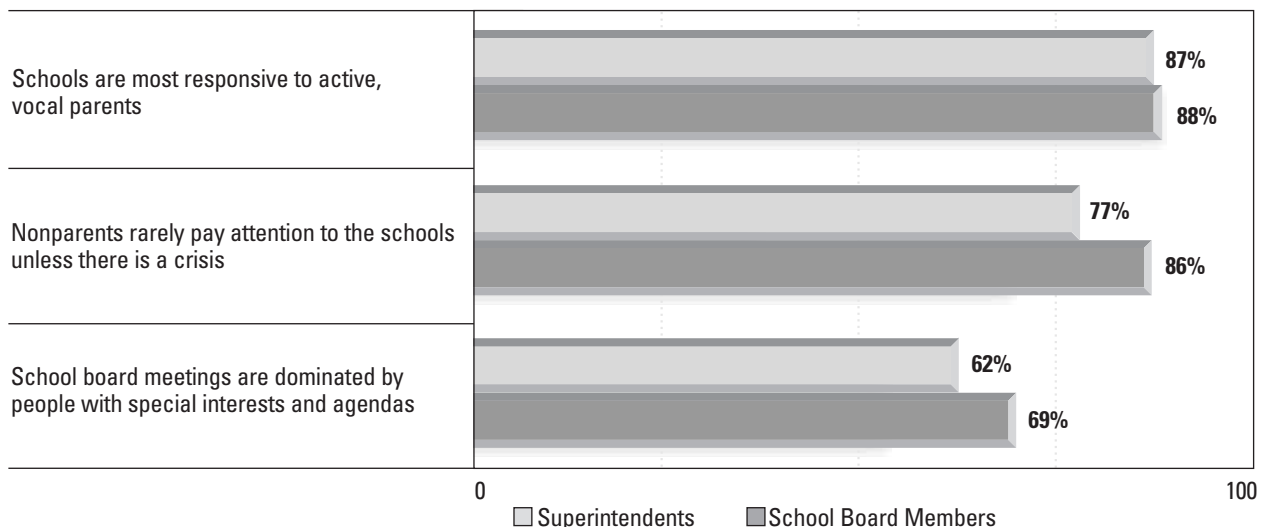
In this survey, the differences that emerge between the views of seniors and other citizens are hardly overwhelming. A larger proportion of people who are 65 years or older indicate that taxes are the first thing that comes to mind when they think about the schools (30%, compared to 19% of 18-to-64 year olds) and that they would not be willing to pay more in taxes for the public schools (53% vs. 45%). But a higher proportion of seniors than non-seniors (66% vs. 56%) also say that all taxpayers, not just parents, should take special responsibility for getting involved in the schools since the schools belong to everyone. Additionally, seniors are more likely to say they voted in the last school board election (60% vs. 43%), although this finding may merely reflect higher voting patterns overall among older Americans.

Superintendents and Boards Getting Along

Similarly, relations among district insiders seem productive and peaceful. The pages of *Education Week*,

School Politics As Usual

Percent of superintendents and school board members who say:



the nation's premier reporter of education news, may be replete with stories of school districts experiencing the gridlock of bitterly divided school boards, superintendents hounded out of their jobs and hyperactive interest groups contesting school policies. But to hear the nation's superintendents and school board members tell it, tranquility and cooperation are the order of the day in their districts.

Members of school boards report, by a 77% to 10% margin, that their relationships with superintendents are mostly cooperative rather than contentious. Superintendents concur by an even greater margin (87% to 6%). Districts rent by divided boards and dominated by representatives with narrow agendas also seem few and far between. Two-thirds of board members (68%) describe relations among the school board members of their district as mostly cooperative, and superintendents again concur (69%). By overwhelming majorities, board members and superintendents (73%, 72%) report that only “one or two” board members—even none at all—“tend to represent the interests of specific, narrow constituencies.”

Carpers and Malcontents

The school board members and superintendents surveyed for this study agree about one persistent source of tension: Most of the citizens they meet have a narrow agenda; most who come to board meetings are there to complain.

The most conventional vehicle for public input—the school board meeting—seems to serve primarily as a platform for community residents who have grievances to register. School board members and superintendents report that board meetings are dominated by individuals with specific agendas (69% and 62%, respectively). Majorities of school board members and superintendents say they most commonly run across community residents who look out for their own interests (63% and 53%, respectively), not people interested in the good of the community as a whole.

Unless There's a Crisis

There is little doubt in the minds of board members and superintendents that it is indeed the squeaky

wheel that gets the grease—nearly nine in ten of both groups say the schools are most responsive to active, vocal parents (88% and 87%, respectively). What about people who don't have a particular agenda? Those who don't have children rarely pay attention, according to district leaders, “unless there's a crisis or controversy”

(86% and 77%, respectively). One focus group participant, a resident of Portland (OR) who was not a parent, seemed to reflect this: “I think the last time we really discussed any education issues was about two years ago, when there were a lot of problems with the public schools.”

Educators are apparently caught between two realities: that the most common forum for community involvement—the school board meeting—seems to amplify the most strident voices; and that community residents who are the least likely to have narrow agendas are also the least likely to make their voices heard.

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Less Confidence Among Teachers

Teachers have a notably less optimistic take on school board politics. They are far more likely to report that “several” or even a majority of their district's board representatives are there to represent narrow constituencies (47%). The attitudes of teachers—taken up in full detail in chapter 3—merit special attention because they are routinely less positive and optimistic about district initiatives and district politics.

How Distinct Groups View Public Engagement

Public engagement is predicated upon some hopeful expectations of the public—namely, that ordinary citizens are both capable *and* willing to engage. It is also clear that public engagement expects a lot from a district's leaders—that they also be willing to respond to public concerns and pursue new ways of dealing with the public. In the real world, neat ideas sometimes

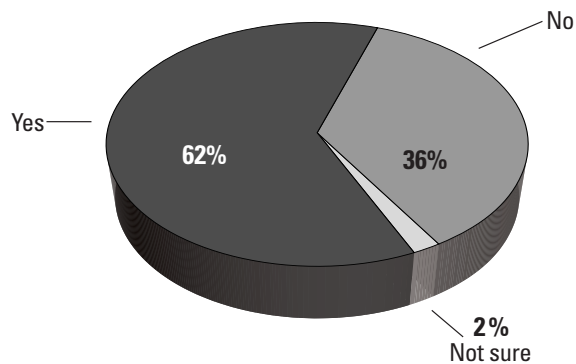
collide with unpleasant truths—not everyone may be eager, able or well intentioned.

The next chapters try to anticipate some of those realities by drawing a map of the terrain of attitudes that educators and non-educators bring to public engagement. Each chapter will identify underlying

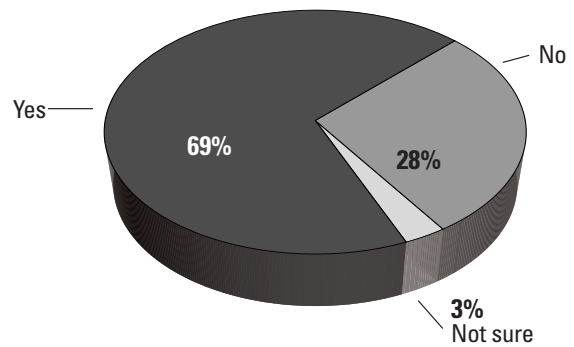
attitudes that could stymie a public engagement effort, complicate it or promote its success. Is the general public receptive to engagement from its school districts? How much of a priority is public engagement for superintendents and school board members—and what do they mean by it? Where do teachers fit in?

Special Agendas Dominate School Board Meetings

Would you say that attendance at your district's school board meetings is mostly dominated by community residents with special interests and agendas, or not?



SUPERINTENDENTS



SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Note: Percentages in charts and tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the charts.

CHAPTER TWO: THE GENERAL PUBLIC— PARENTS, NONPARENTS AND SENIORS

For the most part, parents and nonparents alike are relatively detached from the debates over school policy and seem content to delegate many school matters to educators. But this hands-off approach is far less appealing to those who think their local schools are falling short. Overall, the findings indicate a strong affection for the public schools among the general public. In fact, nonparents are about as likely as parents to be willing to pay more taxes to support the schools and to feel a sense of responsibility toward them.

Survey after survey will show Americans consistently ranking education in the top tier of their list of concerns.¹ Yet many educators routinely grumble that Americans are indifferent—sometimes even hostile—when it comes to giving public schools their actual support. Some suggest that a commitment to public engagement—an effort to revitalize the schools’ relationship to the public—is the medicine needed to regain the public’s support and trust. But is the public ready, willing and able to respond to a public engagement effort?

As became crystal clear from the very first focus group conducted with members of the general public, the term public engagement is wholly unfamiliar to ordinary citizens. But it was more than possible to ask the public about concrete elements of public engagement, about whether and how they are involved in the schools, how—and whether—the schools communicate with them, and how much say (if any) they would like to have over school policy.

Fewer Involved

Based on this study and others, the fact of the matter is that most of the general public,* and even parents of school-age children, seem relatively detached from the schools. Only 14% of nonparents—defined for the purpose of this study as people who don’t have children school-age or younger—describe themselves as “very involved with the public schools.” Their actions support this account: within the past two years, relatively few nonparents have volunteered to help their local school

as “a tutor or coach” (16%) or have participated in an event such as a career night (25%). Only about one in three (34%) nonparents have attended a community function for adults held at the school. One focus group participant simply said, “I don’t have any children myself, so I’m not plugged into that. Parents are the primary customers.”

Not surprisingly, parents with children in public school are more active—but not overwhelmingly so. Most parents (53%) say that their involvement is limited to “my child’s education at home.” Only 31% of parents say they have tutored or coached at some point in the past two years, although 56% have helped at an event to support the school and 40% have attended a school function aimed at adults.

This general picture is confirmed by earlier Public Agenda research. A 1999 study, *Playing Their Parts*, sought to differentiate among the various types of parental involvement—from school governance, to helping with school events, to focusing on what happens at home. Teachers and parents resoundingly agreed that it’s most important for parents to be involved in their children’s lives at home by teaching them to approach their schooling with respect, effort and self-control. Involvement in committees to decide school policies, and even volunteering to help with school activities, were far less crucial, parents and teachers said.²

There is little support for the notion that ordinary Americans resent the public schools or view them as a burden.

* This chapter reports on the general public as a whole (n=809) and, as appropriate, two subgroups of this sample: parents of public school students in grades K-12 (n=205); and “nonparents,” defined as people who do not have children school-age or younger (n=522).

Ball Games and Plays

Educators often say that the best way to gain goodwill is to bring citizens into the public schools. The theory that familiarity translates into support for the schools is widely shared: virtually all superintendents (97%) and school board members (95%) agree that “one of the best ways to win the support of nonparents is to bring them inside and let them see the schools up close” (68% and 60% *strongly* agree).

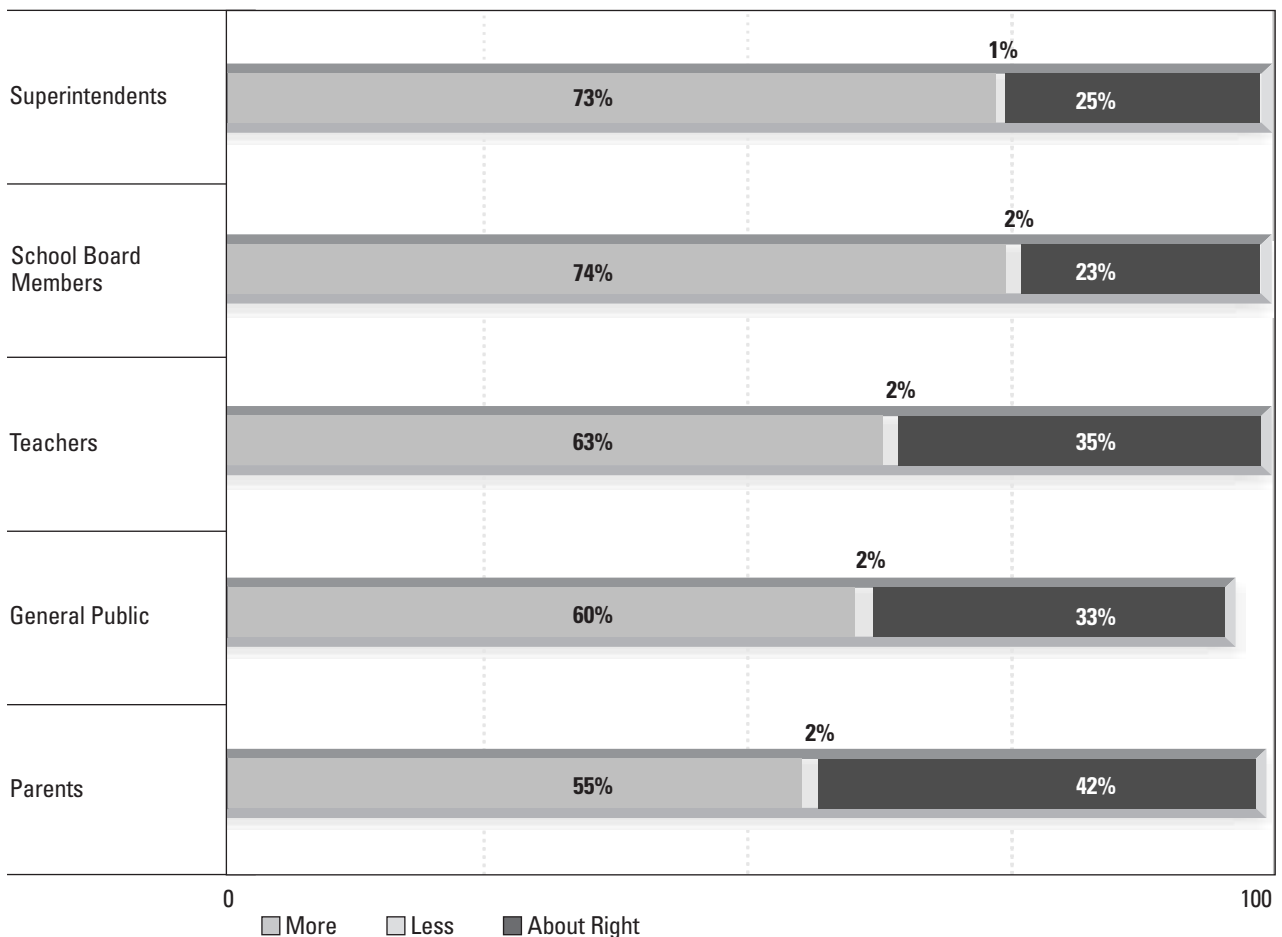
It appears that traditional showcase events—school plays and sporting events—are still relied upon to draw both parents and nonparents into the schools. Most parents (82%) and nonparents (55%) have attended a school play or performance, most parents (66%) and

nonparents (57%) a sports or homecoming event. On the other hand, many school districts may be overlooking the task of communicating with their public, especially with those who are not parents. Fully 52% of nonparents in our survey report they received no printed communication, newsletter or update from their public schools in the past year (among parents the percentage drops to 17%).

“If I wanted to, if I was really involved, I could have found out when their school board meetings were and joined the meeting. But I guess I don’t really hear much about them. I never get anything in the mail or anything regarding the schools around my house,” said one focus group participant.

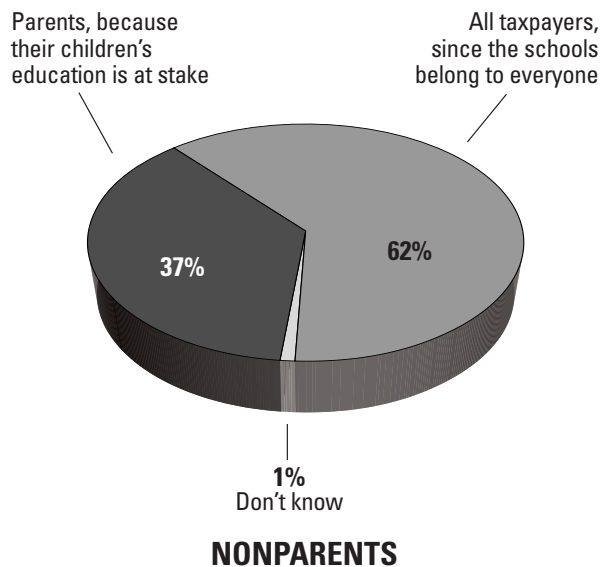
Desire for More Community Involvement

Would you like to see more community involvement in the schools, less of it, or are things about right?



Nonparents Accept Responsibility for Schools

Who should take special responsibility for getting involved in school issues?



Few Know Who's in Charge

Most people seem unacquainted with their school district's policies and leaders. Two-thirds of the general public (66%), and 53% of parents, say they have not attended a meeting about the direction or policies of the public schools within the last year.

Over six in ten (63%) of the public, and 50% of parents, say they would not be able to name their superintendent. Sixty-two percent of the public, and 48% of parents, could not name one member of their school board. Over half (53%) of the public, and 57% of parents, admit they didn't vote in the last school board election—and these numbers are no doubt considerably higher given people's propensity to embellish the extent of their electoral participation.

An Uncaring Public?

The above statistics underscore a simple fact: Most people, for whatever reason, are simply not active in or mindful of school affairs on a routine basis. Some might interpret this to mean that Americans—especially

those without children in the public schools—don't care about schools and that public engagement would therefore be an irrelevant endeavor.

But most people do voice concern about education and their local public schools and believe that their community's well-being is connected to the success or failure of its public schools. Even most nonparents (62%) say all taxpayers should take responsibility for getting involved in school issues, since the schools belong to everyone—only 37% say this is the special responsibility of parents because their children's education is at stake. "You have to keep the schools going strong," said one nonparent. "Our society would fall apart without education."

Not Much Evidence of a Parents vs. Seniors Scenario

There is also little support for the notion that ordinary Americans resent the public schools or view them as a burden. Although nonparents—and senior citizens in particular—are often blamed for turning their backs on the schools, there are only small differences between these groups and parents. Compared to 52% of parents, 48% of nonparents and 42% of senior citizens say they would be willing to pay more in taxes for the public schools in their district. Only 16% of parents say it comes very close to their view that "taxes are the first thing that come to my mind when I think about the schools," and the views of nonparents are not substantially different (23%). Senior citizens are slightly more likely to think about taxes first (30%), but this difference is hardly overwhelming.

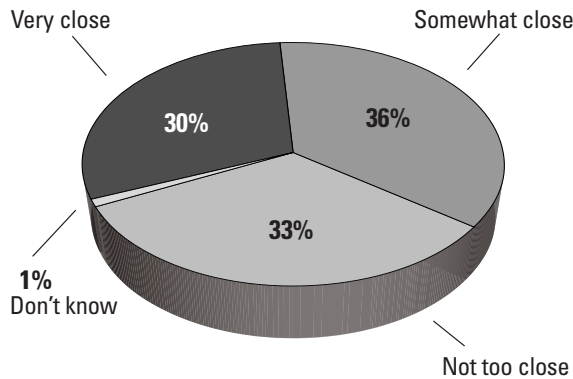
Little Resentment

People not only care about the schools, they say they want to increase community involvement in them, at least in principle (60% say they would like to see more community involvement). Is this mere lip service, or does it mean that the schools somehow fail—by oversight or design—to take advantage of ordinary people's willingness to roll up their sleeves and get to work?

As far as the public is concerned, the issue seems to be less a problem of opportunity, more a problem of

Let Educators Do Their Job

How close does this statement come to your view?
I am comfortable leaving school policies for educators to decide



GENERAL PUBLIC

complacency. A series of survey results clearly show little yearning on the part of individuals to increase their personal involvement in the schools.

Few feel that the public schools are shutting them out. Most (61%) are themselves satisfied with their current level of involvement in the schools. Fully 72% believe that in their school district, people who really want to get involved “can find a way”; only 14% say it’s too hard to find ways to do so.

What’s more, there is little indication that the public is resentful or feels that its concerns are ignored by a professional class of educators who deliberately keep the public at arm’s length from the decision-making process. Only 8% say the schools in their district “seem to discourage residents from getting involved.” Only 22% believe administrators fail to listen and take into account issues people care about.

Comfortable Delegating Responsibility

Indeed, Public Agenda’s research consistently shows that the public is comfortable with delegating substantial responsibility over the schools to educators. Fully two-thirds (66%) of the general public surveyed for this study say they are comfortable with leaving school policies for educators to decide. When it comes to school policies on such matters as discipline or spend-

ing, only 34% want individual members of the community to directly influence decision making; 61% want citizens to make their preferences known through educators or their elected officials.

When asked how administrators currently set school policy, only 33% of the public say the schools proceed without public input—but 38% do not know whether or not school officials listen and take into account what people in the community care about. Once again, the dominant theme is detachment and comfort with delegation, not alienation or anger.

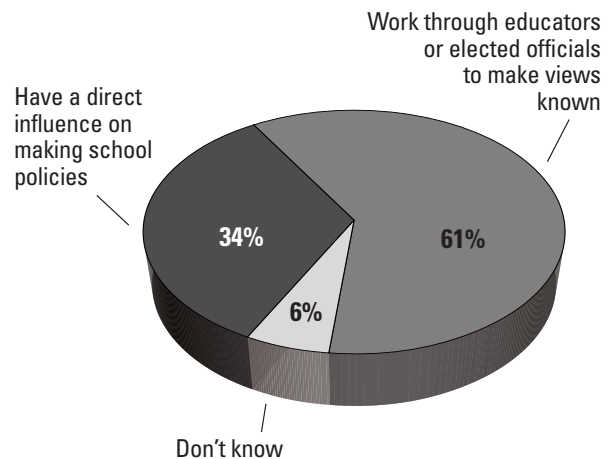
The Consequences of Failure

There is a notable exception to the public’s willingness to delegate the business of school policies to educators. When people think their schools are falling short, they are far less willing to leave school policies to the discretion of district leaders.

Of those who give “good” or “excellent” ratings to their schools, fully 76% are comfortable leaving school policies for educators to decide. But this number drops considerably—to only 48%—among those who give their districts’ schools “fair” or “poor” ratings. Similarly, almost half (46%) of those who rate their schools highly

Few Want Direct Responsibility

When it comes to things like discipline, spending or curriculum, should individual community members:



GENERAL PUBLIC

think that district officials really take into account the education issues people care about, compared to only 22% of those in poorly rated schools. And while half (52%) of those who say their schools are strong want more community involvement, the number surges to almost three in four (74%) respondents who say their schools are weak.

All things being equal, much of the public adopts a detached attitude toward the schools; but when people believe that a threshold of ineptitude has been breached, they appear more anxious to become active.

Courting the Public

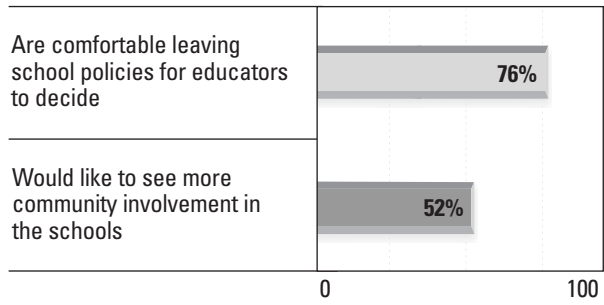
The public has hardly turned its back on the public schools. People value education and are certainly open to increasing community involvement with the public schools, at least on the intellectual level. Ordinary citizens also don't feel locked out or driven out of the public schools—they believe there are enough opportunities for those who want to make their voices heard or who want to lend a helping hand.

But it also is apparent that as long as ordinary citizens think the schools are doing well, they are comfortable leaving education leaders in charge of making policy. Simple inertia inevitably means that only a small segment of the population will reach out to the public schools.

This does not mean that citizens reject public engagement—it would be hard for most to feel strongly either way about something with which they have little real experience. But it does imply that if the schools are truly interested in engaging the public, they—or some other entity—will have to take the initiative. Whoever takes the initiative will have to be mindful that their potential partner is hardly clamoring for the relationship.

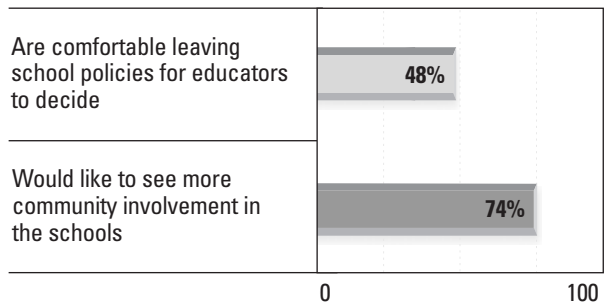
High Performing Schools Make People Comfortable Delegating

People who rate their public schools as “excellent” or “good”



Low Performing Schools Prompt Desire for More Say

People who rate their public schools as “fair” or “poor”



GENERAL PUBLIC

CHAPTER THREE: TEACHERS

Of all the groups surveyed, teachers appear to be the most disgruntled. Most teachers say that they are often left out of the loop in their district’s decision-making process and that administrators don’t take the issues they care about into account. Teachers are also under the impression that community residents are mainly concerned about spending issues when they think about the schools. Even though teachers are often viewed as the frontline of communication with the public—especially among parents—the survey findings suggest that teachers seem to be the forgotten players when it comes to public engagement efforts.

Teachers Are Unfamiliar with Public Engagement

If public engagement efforts are now in place in school districts, most teachers are clearly not part of them. Most are not even comfortable using the term: 70% say they’ve never heard of “public engagement,” at least when talking about schools and education. But after being exposed to the concept of public engagement in this survey, four in ten (42%) say that their district had initiated a public engagement effort. This is only about half as many as the number of superintendents reporting it is in place (78%). Even as district leaders describe how busy they are with their public engagement efforts, many among their frontline personnel do not know what it is or whether it’s happening.

A Neglected Constituency?

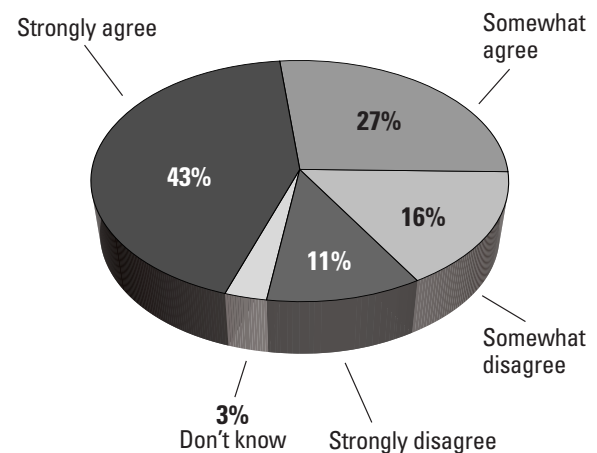
It would be one thing if this were simply a technical lack of awareness or familiarity with a new term on the part of teachers. But it appears to be symptomatic of how teachers view their own place in the policy-making process of their districts. In their vision, they are buffeted by forces beyond their control, and decisions are taken without their input. In short, they see themselves as the perennial soldiers given their marching orders. This state of affairs is more than ironic, since, as will be seen below, teachers may well be the most important—and neglected—constituency when it comes to education reform.

Teachers clearly do not think they are real players in determining the school district’s direction: 70% say

rank-and-file teachers are often left out of the loop in their district’s decision-making process. Teachers also don’t believe that district leaders really put much effort or stock in finding out their views: in their district, say 70% of teachers, when district leaders talk with them about school policy it’s to win teachers’ support for “what the district leadership wants to accomplish.” Only 23% believe the motive is “to gain a better understanding of the issues and concerns of the teachers.” When asked if administrators at least listen to and take into account the issues teachers care about, almost half (49%) say yes, but about as many (44%) say no.

Teachers Feel Out of the Loop

Rank-and-file teachers are often left out of the loop in their district’s decision-making process. Do you agree or disagree?



TEACHERS

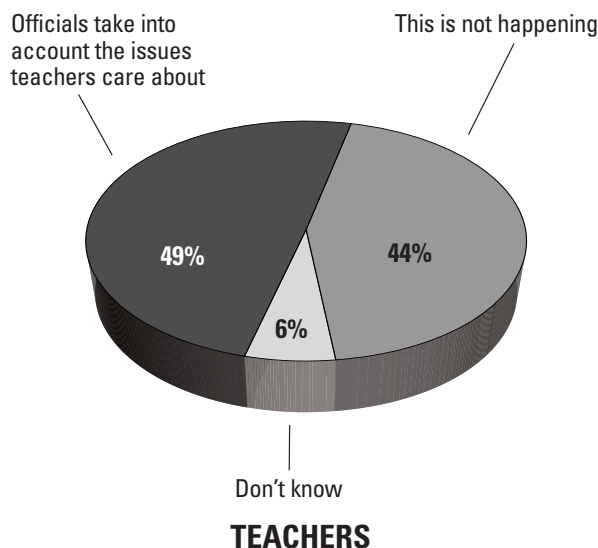
Nor does this seem to be merely a case of teachers feeling sorry for themselves: 52% of school board members also believe that rank-and-file teachers are often left out of the loop (only 34% of superintendents concur). A New Jersey teacher summed it up by saying, “They [district office] don’t communicate...as a teacher, they don’t send anything out to you. You get very little communication.”

Enough Meetings, Not Enough Dialogue

Holding more meetings with teachers does not seem to be the issue—most teachers are pretty satisfied with the number of meetings they have with administrators. Two-thirds (68%) say they are very or somewhat satisfied with the number of meetings they’ve had, and 71% have met with their superintendent in the last year. The same holds true about meetings with other district leaders such as supervisors or coordinators. Nearly eight in ten (78%) are again satisfied with the quantity of meetings they’ve had, and 76% have attended such a meeting in the last year. Face time does not seem to be the problem—responsiveness seems to be.

Do Administrators Really Listen?

Do officials and administrators really listen and take into account the issues that teachers care about, or is this not happening?



The Risks of Leaving Teachers Out

There may be an unpleasant consequence when so many teachers feel they are out of the loop: as many as 75% of teachers believe that “too often, rumors and gossip spread false information in my district.” Official pronouncements and advisories aside, if teachers face an information vacuum, they will gravitate to whatever piece of news—credible or not—promises some portent or signal of what will be.

But districts may suffer a perhaps far more important consequence when teachers are overlooked. For over a decade Public Agenda has chronicled a recurring, commonplace grievance among teachers—that their districts will take up a reform only to drop it as the winds of change sweep their district and replace it with another.

It is tempting for teachers to therefore regard new reform initiatives as simply a temporary phenomenon, driven by whatever new “regime” is installed at the helm of their district or whatever new fad has hit the education field—in any case, something they can ignore or wait out. They tend to regard change crossly, with a “reform du jour” bias.

The Standards Movement and Teacher Engagement

The quintessential example of the dangers of overlooking teachers is probably the most influential reform of the past decade—the nationwide movement toward higher academic standards. The cause may have been taken up by virtually all states, Republican and Democratic presidents and leaders in the fields of education, business and philanthropy, but the nation’s public school teachers—while generally supportive of standards—nevertheless hold some powerful reservations.

Teachers fundamentally feel that social problems, student apathy and lack of parental involvement limit the effectiveness of schools. Their conviction that so much of student achievement is out of their hands leads to some underlying doubts that all children can achieve at high levels, to a consequent rejection of accountability measures that tie teacher and school evaluations to student performance, and to a not insubstantial caution about standardized testing. These

concerns were documented as early as 1993 in Public Agenda’s research for the New Standards Project³, confirmed in several of its subsequent studies and corroborated by the research of other organizations.

Yet few leaders have mustered the requisite energy to engage the qualms of teachers. When coupled with teachers’ inherent suspicion that reform movements are temporary phenomena, the failure to address these concerns means that for many classroom teachers the commitment to high standards may be only halfhearted and decidedly lacking in passion, even though they support the intentions of standards. By implication, one might well imagine that an effort to genuinely respond to the views and address the concerns of teachers—in short, engagement—would offer the hope of energizing their commitment.

Could Teachers Undermine Parental Support?

It may be important to engage teachers for another reason: Teachers are trusted ambassadors and translators for what may be a district’s most important audience—parents. Seven in ten (70%) teachers say parents rely on them most when it comes to what is happening at the schools. Most parents, by their own reckoning, have very positive experiences with their children’s teachers and would seem to have every reason to trust them. An overwhelming majority of parents say that their teachers seem to genuinely care about their child (95%) and really know how to motivate kids to do their best (90%); three in four parents (76%) say they’ve received good advice from teachers on ways to help their child learn.⁴

There is a promised payoff to engagement because the district that gets teacher input and buy-in may well gain by having closer contact with and support from parents. Equally important to acknowledge, however, is the potential cost of lack of engagement—in that teacher resistance or outright opposition could lead to *parental* resistance or opposition.

What Teachers Think about Taxpayers

Given their access to and credibility with parents, teachers may be a great resource for public engage-

Teachers’ Views of the General Public

Percent of teachers who “strongly” or “somewhat” agree with the following:

The most important thing community residents can do for schools is to give educators their strong support	97%
One of the best ways for schools to win support of nonparents is to bring them inside to see the schools up close	94
Spending issues are what community residents are most concerned about	74

TEACHERS

ment, at least in theory. But the survey results also indicate that some precautionary notes are in order because their views of the public are complicated, even somewhat jaundiced.

On the one hand, teachers would seem to welcome the idea of bringing the schools and the community closer together: 63% would like to see more community involvement in the schools; 35% are satisfied with the way things are. But like the public, teachers believe the schools are already working hard to reach out to the community. Nearly two-thirds (65%) say schools go out of their way to encourage and welcome community residents; 33% say schools mostly leave it up to residents. Overall, most teachers do think people in their school district tend to be supportive of the schools (64%).

On the other hand, their attitudes evince a certain degree of skepticism. Almost three-fourths (74%) believe spending issues are what community residents are most concerned about. As a New Jersey teacher put it, “The public looks at the dollar amount. They’re concerned about their taxes going up.” And right now, virtually all teachers (91%) agree that “the schools are most responsive to parents who are very active and vocal” (65% *strongly* agree).

Teachers Are Looking for Public Support

Teachers believe in community involvement, but for strictly defined purposes. Almost all agree (94%) that

one of the best ways to win the support of people who don't have kids is to bring them inside the schools. As one teacher said, "If they [public] were involved more often—all the time—you'd hear their positives, and maybe they would be a little more informed about what's really going on. It would be much more beneficial."

When teachers think of the benefits of bringing the public in, they focus primarily on getting them on the public school bandwagon—not on hearing their concerns or getting their feedback on school policies. A resounding 97% agree that the "most important thing community residents can do for the schools is to give educators their strong support." As one focus group teacher put it, "We're asking them for support, to back us up, and to possibly provide other programs to help support what we're doing—not how to do our job."

Rather than enlisting ordinary citizens to actively engage in the mission of education, teachers view citizens primarily as voters, taxpayers and cheerleaders. In this respect, it seems ironic that the kind of relationship teachers want the public to have with the schools—where teachers bring the public in mostly for support—is uncomfortably close to what teachers describe as their own relationship with district leaders.

Forgotten Players

Teachers would seem to merit the attention of a public engagement effort—indeed it could be argued that they could be playing "first chair"—both

because so much of any reform agenda must eventually work through them and because they may be an invaluable resource for reaching the public and parents in particular. At this juncture, however, teachers seem to be forgotten players.

But just as there appear to be potential gains to be had if district leaders make teacher engagement part and parcel of their public engagement effort, there are also obstacles to be avoided. Just how district leaders pursue teachers is a critical question. Simply expecting teachers to automatically internalize the district's agenda would seem to be wishful thinking—teachers have seen too much to merely "get with the program." Assuming that they will promote district policies, rather than undercut them, may be imprudent. Expecting to win them over simply by holding more of the same types of meetings may well lead to more alienation, not less. Finally, overestimating teachers' goodwill toward the public may prove dangerously counterproductive.

Simply expecting teachers to automatically internalize the district's agenda would seem to be wishful thinking—teachers have seen too much to merely "get with the program."

CHAPTER FOUR: SUPERINTENDENTS

Superintendents are by far the most familiar with the concept of public engagement, and most say that public engagement efforts are currently in place in their district. In addition to traditional communication—e.g., explaining policies and building public support—their definition of public engagement includes give-and-take dialogue with community residents and listening to what people want the schools to look like. However, more often than not, their goal is to help the community understand and support the schools, not to better understand community views. Communicating with the public, superintendents report, is only one of many issues that compete for their attention.

Superintendents: At the Vortex of Their District

For over a decade, Public Agenda researchers have conducted countless in-depth interviews with superintendents and have presented to forums and associations of these administrators. As a group, they have almost always given the impression of being highly educated, experienced and extremely sophisticated about developments in their field. Superintendents leading even the smallest school districts track national school trends and are conversant with the educational and management issues of the day. What's more, they appear to be at the vortex of their districts, typically negotiating with divergent groups, juggling competing agendas and navigating what is sometimes tricky political terrain.

We've Got Public Engagement

If public engagement is happening in school districts—and fully 78% of superintendents say such an effort is currently in place in their district—chances are very good that superintendents are intimately familiar with the issue, if not spearheading it themselves, and that they will have quite a bit to say about it. So what kind of public engagement are they involved with, and what purposes is it serving?

More Than Just a Fad

One might expect school superintendents to look at public engagement with a healthy dose of skepticism.

After all, many suspect their field is buffeted by fads that fail to deliver real improvement and catchy slogans that merely re-label old truisms. But in fact, superintendents are not dismissive of the concept of public engagement, nor are they likely to view it as just another fad. Very few think of it as just a “fancy term for parental involvement” (16%); few believe it is merely a “new name for an old concept” (14%); and virtually no one (1%) calls it “a passing fad.”

When I Say Public Engagement, I Mean...

Asked what they would include under the public engagement rubric, the nation's school superintendents include the traditional communication—explaining policies and building support for decisions made by district leaders. Most say the term means “communication that informs parents about what the schools are doing” (90%); “explaining schools’ policies to the public” (77%); and a “way to improve the image of the public schools” (70%). “Public engagement is a good way to bring parents into the school and highlight the good things we do,” said one superintendent.

“You really have to take the time to talk to parents. If you don’t, it’s a lethal mistake,” admonished one superintendent. “The rumors spread like wildfire.”

How Superintendents Define Public Engagement

Percent who say public engagement is:

Communication that informs parents about what the schools are doing	90%
Give-and-take, open discussions with community residents	85
Listening to what the community wants its public schools to look like	83
A chance for community residents to influence school policy	77
Explaining school policies to the public	77
A way to improve the image of public schools	70
People confronting and understanding tradeoffs of school policies	30
A fancy term for parental involvement	16
A new name for an old concept	14
Something that rarely works as promised	4
A passing fad	1

More than PR

But if this were all superintendents intend public engagement to mean, one might well question how it is unique and whether it adds anything to traditional efforts to communicate with parents and the community. In fact, superintendents have an expanded—one might even say elevated—definition of the concept.

The vast majority (85%) believe it means “give and take, open discussions with community residents.” More than eight in ten (83%) say that to them, public engagement also means “listening to what the community wants its public schools to look like.” Finally, three in four (77%) think of it as “a chance for community residents to influence school policy.”

“You really have to take the time to talk to parents. If you don’t, it’s a lethal mistake,” admonished one superintendent. “The rumors spread like wildfire.” Thus—at

least in the abstract—when the typical superintendent thinks about public engagement, he or she envisions far more than a top-down communication or conventional public relations.

Business as Usual

Yet public engagement is fundamentally about communicating with the public in a different way—the real proof is in what superintendents are doing vis-à-vis the public, not in how they are defining the issue. It is here that a serious drop-off seems to occur: the gap between intention and execution, belief and action, looms large.

At first glance, many superintendents seem to look to their publics for advice and input: 54% say they set district policies in partnership with their community, but a significant proportion (41%) indicate they first set policies with other district leaders, *then* try to get the public on board.

More to the point, however, superintendents overwhelmingly (73%) say that when the leaders in their own district initiate communication, it is to help people understand and support the schools, not to understand the community’s concerns (20%). Perhaps more revealing is what superintendents report about themselves: fully 62% say the last time they met with community residents, their main purpose was to explain—and get people to support—their initiative.

Intention and Follow-Through

The drop-off between intention and follow-through in public engagement begs explanation—and the survey results suggest several. For one thing, superintendents are professionals and, as such, draw primarily upon their own experiences, training and sensibilities when making policy.

In the survey, seven in ten (71%) confide that they tend to make decisions based on their own experience and sense of what is right; only 23% say their decisions reflect the preferences of their constituents. “We have a few people who want to micro-manage, but for the most part people are happy leaving education to us,” said one superintendent. In the age-old debate over the

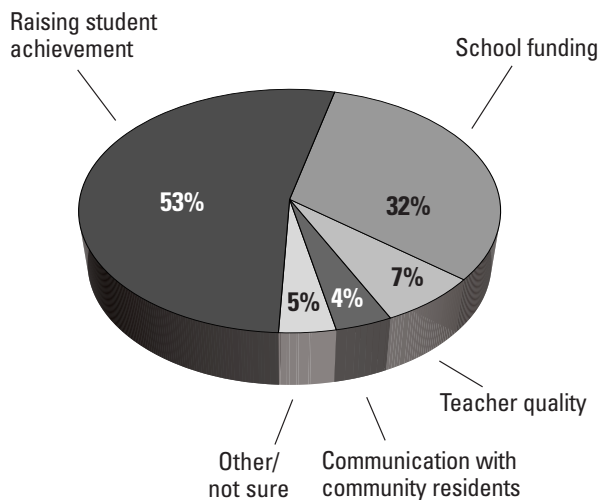
role of leaders in a democracy—to decide policy according to leadership’s sense of what is right or according to constituent preferences—superintendents seem to lean to the former.

Advocates of public engagement might argue that communications—and specifically public engagement — should be part-and-parcel of any district initiative. But it also is clear that superintendents face a full agenda of issues and that even ordinary communication—much less public engagement—has to face some pretty tough competition for attention. Asked to pick the “most pressing issue facing your school district these days,” 53% of superintendents would point to “raising student achievement,” another 32% to school funding. When set against such stalwart and undoubtedly worthy goals, it is perhaps understandable that “communication between the schools and community residents” is the most pressing issue to only a few superintendents (4%).

A final explanation for the apparent drop-off between the intent to pursue public engagement and actual follow-through is that superintendents may view public engagement as a luxury they cannot afford. Sixty-three percent of superintendents say that the more pressing

Communications Has Competition

Which is the most pressing issue facing your school district these days?

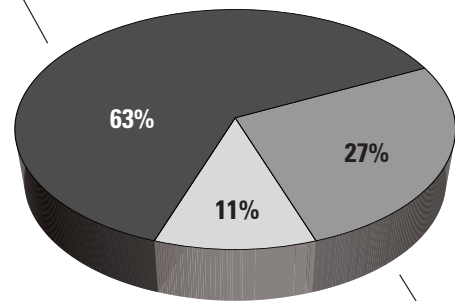


SUPERINTENDENTS

Getting Support Outranks Being More Responsive

Which is a more pressing need right now in your school district?

For the community to be more supportive of the schools



Not sure

For schools to be more responsive to the community

SUPERINTENDENTS

need right now is for residents of their community to become more supportive of the public schools, not for the schools to be responsive to the issues the community cares about (27%).

Good Intentions

Give-and-take, open-ended discussions with residents of their communities about the direction of the public schools sounds appealing to superintendents and indeed garners their wholehearted support—at least in attitude. But this initial enthusiasm is more than offset by a set of perceptions that, taken together, conspire to short-circuit good intentions. Indeed, the very notion that there is such a thing as a “general public”—as opposed to many different population segments with differing agendas—was questioned by several of the experts and superintendents Public Agenda interviewed in preparation for this study.

CHAPTER FIVE: SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

According to school board members, listening to complaints is a far too frequent occurrence in their day-to-day dealings with community residents. They describe their school board meetings as generally unproductive and dominated by a few individuals with narrow interests; yet they depend a lot on these meetings for understanding the public’s thinking. Although school board members appear to be open to new ways of communicating and to the concepts of public engagement, they are somewhat skeptical about the public. For example, many believe that most parents lack sufficient knowledge about the schools and that people who don’t have kids pay attention only during a crisis or controversy.

Board Members Mostly See Constituents with a Bone to Pick

In preliminary interviews preceding the survey, school board members made clear that students are their main concern—as one board member said, “Kids are my constituents.” According to a plurality (41%) of school board members, raising student achievement is the most pressing issue facing their district.

But students are hardly the people board members are most likely to deal with on a daily basis. Instead, nine in ten (90%) board members surveyed nationwide say they hear mostly from people who have either complaints or demands. Large majorities say most of the people they run across are looking out for their own interests (63%) and are mostly interested in hearing viewpoints they agree with (67%).

Perhaps as a result, board members are undecided over whether there is anything “general” about the general public. About half (49%) say that, in their community, “there is no such thing as the general public—there are many different groups with vastly different views about the public schools”; the other half (48%) say “there are different groups but they have enough in common and often share a similar outlook about the public schools.”

Board Meetings Not Effective

As noted earlier, the survey findings clearly support the opinion that school board meetings are unproductive: 69% of board members say school board meetings are

dominated by people with special interests or agendas. Only one in four (25%) board members indicates that public attendance tends to be high at their meetings, and only one in four (25%) considers board meetings

How School Board Members Define Public Engagement

Percent who say public engagement is:

Communication that informs parents about what the schools are doing	87%
Give-and-take, open discussions with community residents	74
Explaining school policies to the public	73
A way to improve the image of public schools	65
Listening to what the community wants its public schools to look like	62
A chance for community residents to influence school policy	61
People confronting and understanding tradeoffs of school policies	26
A fancy term for parental involvement	14
A new name for an old concept	14
Something that rarely works as promised	9
A passing fad	2

and hearings to be very effective for communicating with large groups such as parents and teachers (another 58% say they are somewhat effective, and 16% say they are not effective at all).

But It's All We've Got

Here we have a meeting that does not seem to represent a broad segment of the public and where most attendees are perceived as representing narrow interests. Yet a majority (51%) of board members say they rely *a lot* on public board meetings and hearings to understand the views of community residents on issues relating to the public schools (this number drops to 40% among superintendents).

It is apparent that board members rely on fewer mechanisms to gauge the public's perspective: for example, fewer rely a lot upon "informal meetings with parents and other community residents" (28% compared with 40% of superintendents). Compared to a variety of other potential sources of information about community sentiment, including other types of community meetings, voting results and local media coverage, board meetings are by far the most heavily relied upon resource for school board members.

Open to New Ways of Reaching the Public

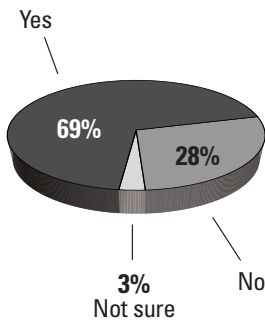
Perhaps it is the dearth of channels of communication with the public—as well as the unsatisfying nature of board meetings—that leaves school board members open to new ways of expanding the public's role in public schools and to public engagement itself.

School board members are not at all dismissive of public engagement. Few view it as "a fancy term for parental involvement" (14%), "a new name for an old concept" (14%) or "a passing fad" (2%). Rather large majorities, in fact, view it as a communications tool: 87% say it is "communication that informs parents about what the schools are doing," 73% that it is a way of "explaining school policies to the public" and 65% that it is a way "to improve the image of the public schools."

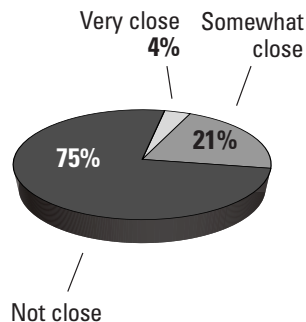
Almost three out of four (74%) board members would like to see members of their community be more involved in the schools. Most say that when they are setting school district policy on such issues as discipline, spending or curriculum, their approach is to develop policy in partnership with the community, not to set policy at the top and then get the community on board (62% vs. 33%). Ninety-five percent of board members agree that "one of the best ways for schools to win the support

Means of Communication

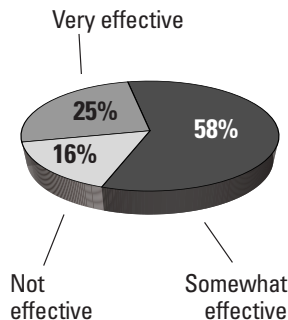
Is attendance at school board meetings mostly dominated by people with special interests and agendas?



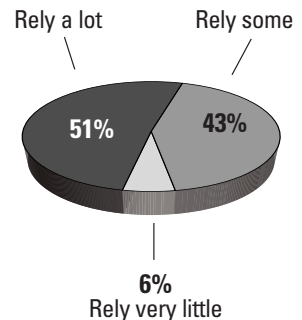
How close does this come to your view? Attendance is almost always high at public meetings about the schools.



How effective are school board meetings as a way of communicating with large groups?



How much do you rely on school board meetings and hearings to understand the views of community residents?



SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

of nonparents is to bring them inside and let them see the schools up close” (60% *strongly* agree).

But Will They Lead the Charge?

But just like teachers, school board members carry a set of attitudes toward the public that may well constrain and qualify how far they are willing to go to bring ordinary citizens in. Compared to superintendents, board members look at public engagement with support but with less enthusiasm. For example, they are less likely to describe public engagement as “listening to what the community wants its public schools to look like” (62% of board members vs. 83% of superintendents) or “a chance for community residents to influence school policy” (61% vs. 77%, respectively). They are also less likely to say public engagement efforts are in place in their own district (57% vs. 78%, respectively).

It may be that school board members have become jaded and skeptical of the public’s goodwill through accumulated exposure to highly partisan individuals. They are more likely than superintendents to believe that “spending issues are what community residents are most concerned about” (82% vs. 68%).

School board members also appear to be critical of various constituent groups and to view community members as generally uninformed and disengaged. Only 12% of board members, for example, say that “most” parents in their district are well-informed when it comes to education issues. An overwhelming majority (86%) agree that “people who don’t have children rarely pay close attention to the schools unless there’s a crisis or controversy,” with almost half (49%) *strongly* agreeing.

Skeptical about the Public

In theory, public engagement provides a fuller opportunity for public input, but in practice, board members are more likely to view the relationship between leaders and the public in a traditional, top-down manner. Almost seven in ten (68%) board members agree that there is a pressing need for residents in their community to be more supportive and responsive to the schools rather than the other way around. And a similar proportion (66%) agrees with the statement “Community

residents are responsible for speaking out about the school issues that concern them—educators cannot be expected to constantly seek their input.” More than half (56%) of board members —compared to 37% of superintendents—say the statement “Educators and elected officials should be primarily responsible for deciding specific school policies—that’s their job” comes very close to their view.

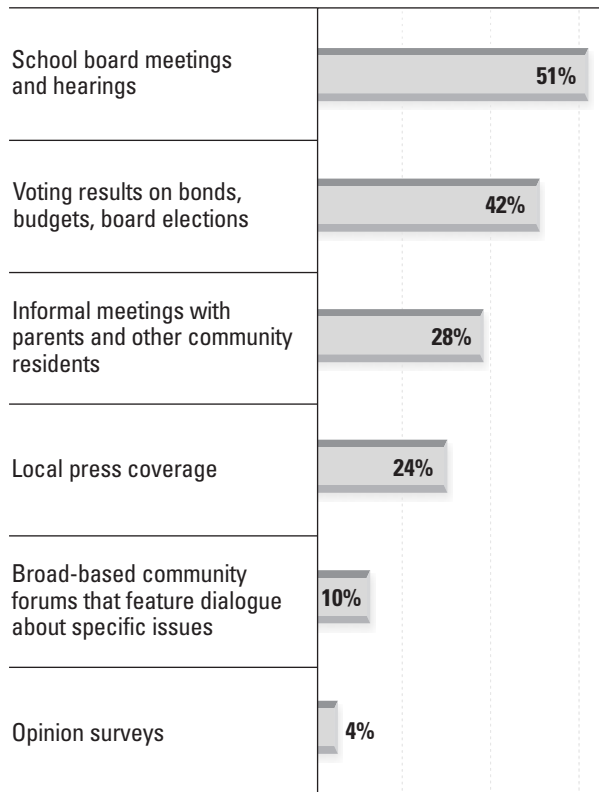
Looking for Another Way to Do Business

One of the most interesting findings in this study—and one fraught with implications for changing business as

School Board Meetings Are Top Source of Feedback

How much do you rely on each of the following to understand the views of community residents?

Percent of board members who say they “rely a lot” on each of the following:



SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

usual—is that even as school board meetings are characterized as unproductive, a majority of board members rely on these meetings to understand the views of community residents on issues relating to the public schools. This would mean that the single most visible way community residents can communicate with the schools—the neighborhood school board meeting—is ineffective. To hear school board members say it, the old-style school board meeting has become

a vehicle for a few vocal individuals to voice their complaints. What this suggests is that reaching out to citizens who have a broad rather than particular agenda may be one of the most important benefits of public engagement.

It may be that school board members have become jaded and skeptical of the public's goodwill through accumulated exposure to highly partisan individuals.

CHAPTER SIX: SO WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY DISTRICT?

By Jean Johnson

Just Waiting to Be Asked? is primarily an examination of the attitudes and assumptions different groups—superintendents, board members, teachers, parents and nonparents—bring to the area of public engagement, not a practical guide on how to do it. But the research does, it seems to us, have some important messages for practitioners and those who may be considering such initiatives. Here are the most important:

Don't assume that the public is hostile to public education or insensitive to the challenges that it faces. By now, most people who deal with education know that increasing community involvement in the schools is a daunting task—one that requires enormous stores of energy, optimism and patience. But people both inside and outside education see the situation in much bleaker terms. Some view the public as an adversary or an opponent to be neutralized or “handled.” Older Americans and adults without children—the conventional wisdom holds—can be counted on to be downright hostile to education, actively resenting public schools for the tax dollars they consume. But this research, along with other studies Public Agenda has conducted, suggests that the public's concern for the public schools is consistent and sincere. Though often uninformed and detached about the operational details and policy debates in education, ordinary citizens want the public schools, students and educators to succeed—and they do not need to be motivated by narrow self-interest to feel this.

Don't assume that school leaders are hostile to engaging the public. This study demonstrates that district leaders are hardly dismissive of the importance—even need—for public engagement. It may be difficult for them to depart from traditional ways of communicating with the public, and they cannot help but be affected by routine exposure to a handful of highly partisan citizens with the smallest of agendas. But they appear to want a new way for deliberating with and understanding community residents that transcends the traditional school board meeting. Indeed, for all groups surveyed in this study, the school board meeting appears to be one of the least satisfying, least productive

—and even counterproductive—methods of engaging the public. Yet often it is the only game in town.

Don't assume that public engagement is always a top priority or that any important issue or dilemma is ripe for public engagement. Public engagement has

an almost palpable appeal to anyone who believes in democratic values and recognizes the close, even symbiotic, relationship between school effectiveness and strong community and parental support.

But you can't talk about everything all the time, and it would cease to be effective if you did. Both parents and other members of the general public are quite willing to delegate many education decisions to teachers, principals, superintendents and board members in their community. In general they respect their judgment, and few seem eager to wrest control or endlessly second guess decisions that depend mainly on professional experience and judgment. But people do need to be forewarned and consulted in times of fundamental change; they do need to think through alternatives in times of crisis or serious community division; and they expect their most serious concerns to get a respectful hearing. Reserving public engagement for times when genuine dialogue is needed is probably at the heart of making it work.

Don't confuse issues that need public engagement with issues that need leadership and professional follow-through. The public is quite good, when given the opportunity, at voicing its values and communicating areas of concern. Ordinary citizens even have, given the right context and information, the patience to understand and sort through alternative approaches and goals and to think through the costs and tradeoffs that are often involved. Indeed, typical citizens often prove themselves to be more open-minded, more fair-minded, and more practically oriented than many specialists. But they are weakest when it comes to the details of

But you can't talk about everything all the time, and it would cease to be effective if you did. Both parents and the general public are quite willing to delegate many education decisions to educators.

policy responses, questions of system management, apportioning responsibilities, legal considerations and similar nuts and bolts. An adage often used in business may have some application to public engagement: A good businessman routinely asks his customers what they need and want, but only a foolish businessman asks his customers how to manage the company.

Don't confuse public engagement with constituency building. Public engagement is generally defined as two-way communication, an attitude and approach that offers information certainly, but also seeks feedback and retains the flexibility to respond to it meaningfully. This is a different enterprise than advocacy or constituency building. A thriving democracy depends on people willing to push their cause, and there are times when community or district leaders need to rally support or when partisan or interest groups need to take on particular missions and activities. But using the tactics and approach of public engagement—appearing to seek feedback when only one set of answers is sought—could backfire, intensifying public distrust and skepticism.

Don't leave teachers out of the loop. The very term “public engagement” implies reaching out to those outside the schools, an important challenge in many if not most communities. But perhaps the most urgent

message emerging from this study is the need for district leaders and education reformers to put the essentials of public engagement to work with the nation's teaching corps. Maybe because teachers are so close, district leaders often appear to overlook the need to do their homework with this critical constituency. Yet, more than any other group, teachers feel left out of the loop. In Public Agenda focus groups in this and other projects, teachers often joke bitterly about what they do with the latest departmental memos and routinely greet major education initiatives with “this too will pass” derision. Teachers are not only the main actors in any school, they are also the chief communications channel to parents and the community.

One of the most critical lessons emerging from this research is that there is a potentially big payoff to engaging teachers—and a comparably big downside to assuming they will go along enthusiastically with whatever program leaders have selected. Those seeking change and improvement in today's schools ignore teachers at their peril.

Perhaps the most urgent message emerging from this study is the need for district leaders and education reformers to put the essentials of public engagement to work with the nation's teaching corps.

SUPPORTING TABLES

TABLE ONE: The Relationship Between Public Schools and Their Communities

Here are some statements about the relationship between public schools and their communities. Do you agree or disagree with each? Is that strongly or somewhat?

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS		BOARD MEMBERS		TEACHERS	
	Agree Strongly/ Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/ Strongly	Agree Strongly/ Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/ Strongly	Agree Strongly/ Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/ Strongly
One of the best ways for schools to win the support of nonparents is to bring them inside and let them see the schools up close	68 / 29	2 / 1	60 / 36	3 / *	76 / 18	3 / 2
The most important thing community residents can do for the schools is to give educators their strong support	47 / 42	10 / 1	46 / 42	9 / 2	91 / 6	2 / *
People who don't have children rarely pay close attention to the schools unless there's a crisis or controversy	32 / 46	16 / 6	49 / 37	10 / 4	59 / 22	12 / 6
The schools are most responsive to parents who are very active and vocal	27 / 60	10 / 2	43 / 45	10 / 3	65 / 26	6 / 3
The schools need to do a far better job of listening to the concerns of community residents	26 / 51	19 / 3	26 / 50	20 / 4	21 / 37	26 / 14
When it comes to communication about what's happening in the schools, parents rely on teachers most	23 / 49	22 / 6	21 / 44	28 / 5	47 / 23	17 / 12
Community residents are sufficiently capable of carefully considering important issues involving education and the public schools	19 / 54	22 / 6	19 / 47	26 / 7	24 / 36	22 / 16
Most parents are happy to leave school policies for educators to decide	10 / 58	24 / 8	19 / 54	22 / 5	28 / 37	22 / 12
Rank-and-file teachers are often left out of the loop in their district's decision-making process	3 / 31	40 / 25	13 / 39	30 / 16	43 / 27	16 / 11

Superintendents: n = 686 Board Members: n = 475 Teachers: n = 404

Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

TABLE TWO: How Educators Describe Their Districts

How close do each of the following come to describing the current situation in your school district?

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS			BOARD MEMBERS			TEACHERS		
	Very Close	Somewhat Close	Not Close	Very Close	Somewhat Close	Not Close	Very Close	Somewhat Close	Not Close
In my job, the people I hear the most from are people who either have complaints or demands	45	41	14	54	36	10	—	—	—
Too often, rumors and gossip spread false information in my school district	36	44	20	41	40	18	45	30	23
People rely on the schools to bring them together and give the community a sense of identity	23	57	19	14	48	37	33	40	27
Spending issues are what community residents are most concerned about	21	47	31	34	48	18	47	26	23
My district is so diverse that it is difficult to communicate well with the many different groups	9	28	62	6	25	68	15	20	65
Attendance by community residents is almost always high at public meetings about the schools	3	32	65	4	21	75	14	26	57

Superintendents: n = 686 Board Members: n = 475 Teachers: n = 404

TABLE THREE: How District Leaders Learn about the Public

How much do you rely on the following to understand the views of community residents on issues relating to the public schools?

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS			BOARD MEMBERS		
	A Lot	Some	Very Little	A Lot	Some	Very Little
Informal meetings with parents and other community residents	40	54	6	28	53	18
School board meetings and hearings	40	52	8	51	43	6
Voting results on bonds, budgets and board elections	36	48	16	42	43	14
Local press coverage	33	50	17	24	47	29
Opinion surveys	11	48	41	4	42	52
Broad-based community forums that feature dialogue about specific issues	10	48	42	10	40	48

Superintendents: n = 686 Board Members: n = 475

TABLE FOUR: How to Communicate with Parents and Teachers

How effective have you found the following as ways of communicating with large groups such as parents and teachers?

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS				BOARD MEMBERS			
	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Effective	Have Never Done	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Effective	Have Never Done
Face-to-face meetings with leaders of groups, such as PTA heads or union leaders	64	33	2	*	35	49	7	5
Written announcements sent to everyone involved	23	65	8	1	18	62	9	8
School board meetings	21	57	22	*	25	58	16	*
Initiating press coverage through press releases and contacts with reporters	18	64	15	1	11	53	21	10
Town hall meetings	9	44	24	16	8	35	22	28

Superintendents: n = 686 Board Members: n = 475

TABLE FIVE: Relations Among Groups in Districts

Overall, how would you characterize relations between the following groups in recent times?

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS				BOARD MEMBERS			
	Mostly Cooperative	About Even	Mostly Contentious	No Relations	Mostly Cooperative	About Even	Mostly Contentious	No Relations
Between the school board and the superintendent	87	7	6	*	77	12	10	*
Between parents and teachers	84	15	2	*	64	30	2	1
Between the superintendent and teachers	83	15	2	*	59	28	11	1
Between the business community and the school district	76	19	2	2	66	23	3	6
Between the local media and the school district	72	21	6	1	62	27	7	3
Among school board members themselves	69	21	10	1	68	20	11	1
Between organized religious groups and the school district	65	20	2	9	51	21	3	16
Between senior citizens and the school district	54	26	4	8	42	26	6	15

Superintendents: n = 686 Board Members: n = 475

TABLE SIX: Who Is Responsible for Public Engagement?

How close do the following statements describe your own view?

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS			BOARD MEMBERS			TEACHERS		
	Very Close	Somewhat Close	Not Close	Very Close	Somewhat Close	Not Close	Very Close	Somewhat Close	Not Close
Educators and elected officials should be primarily responsible for deciding specific school policies—that’s their job	37	49	14	56	36	7	39	37	22
I would like to do more in terms of engaging the public on school-related issues, but there’s just not enough time	21	55	23	25	48	24	—	—	—
Community residents should have a direct influence on specific school policies such as discipline and curriculum	17	62	21	18	50	30	19	38	41
Community residents are responsible for speaking out about the school issues that concern them—educators cannot be expected to constantly seek their input	5	35	60	23	43	32	36	44	18

Superintendents: n = 686 Board Members: n = 475 Teachers: n = 404

TABLE SEVEN: How District Leaders Define Public Engagement

Here are some things people say about public engagement. Which of these are part of what public engagement means to you. (Please check all that apply.)

	SUPERINTENDENTS % indicating yes	BOARD MEMBERS % indicating yes
Communication that informs parents about what the schools are doing	90	87
Give-and-take, open discussions with community residents	85	74
Listening to what the community wants its public schools to look like	83	62
A chance for community residents to influence school policy	77	61
Explaining school policies to the public	77	73
A way to improve the image of public schools	70	65
People confronting and understanding tradeoffs of school policies	30	26
A fancy term for parental involvement	16	14
A new name for an old concept	14	14
Something that rarely works as promised	4	9
A passing fad	1	2

Superintendents: n = 686 Board Members: n = 475

TABLE EIGHT: What District Leaders Expect of Public Engagement

If sustained public engagement efforts were to take place in your school district, how likely is it that each of the following would happen?

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS			BOARD MEMBERS		
	Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Not Likely	Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Not Likely
Community residents' support for the public schools would increase	44	50	4	36	52	8
Community residents would have more influence over the direction of the public schools	30	60	8	18	56	22
School policies would take a lot longer to decide	30	50	16	19	42	32
School policies would be consistently more effective	20	49	22	18	50	25
The district's leadership would be overwhelmed by the amount of time this requires	18	39	40	17	34	44
More common ground among special interest groups would emerge	17	55	22	13	52	27
Too many people would get involved in areas where they have little experience	12	35	46	17	34	43
Too many groups would end up competing for influence over school policies	10	36	46	15	31	47
Lots of people would pay lip service to it, but there would be little follow-through	6	42	47	14	43	34

Superintendents: n = 686 Board Members: n = 475

TABLE NINE: Public Attitudes about the Schools

How close do each of the following statements come to your own views about the schools in your district? [INSERT ITEM RANDOMLY.] Is that very close, somewhat close or not too close to your own view?

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC			PARENTS*			NONPARENTS†		
	Very Close	Somewhat Close	Not too Close	Very Close	Somewhat Close	Not too Close	Very Close	Somewhat Close	Not too Close
For the most part, I am comfortable leaving school policies for educators to decide	30	36	33	30	44	26	33	32	34
Taxpayers in my community get their money's worth when it comes to public education	29	34	33	35	35	30	28	33	35
The schools need to do a far better job of reaching out to people who are not parents	29	32	33	23	33	38	31	31	32
One of the main reasons I live in this community is the quality of its schools	26	21	52	42	25	32	19	19	61
Too often, rumors and gossip spread false information about the schools in my district	22	29	44	21	26	50	23	29	41
Unless there's a controversy or something unusual happening, I rarely pay close attention to the schools	22	31	46	18	22	60	26	33	41
In general, taxes are the first thing that come to my mind when I think about the schools	20	23	56	16	22	63	23	23	53

General Public: n = 809 Parents: n = 205 Nonparents: n = 522

*Note: Has child who attends public school grade K-12. These parents are part of the general public sample.

†Note: Does *not* have either school-age or preschool children. These respondents are part of the general public sample.

TABLE TEN: When People Come to School

Thinking back over the past two years, please tell me if you have done any of the following:

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC	PARENTS*	NONPARENTS†
Attended a school play or performance	62	82	55
Attended a school sports event such as a football game or homecoming	59	66	57
Attended a community function held at the school that was aimed at adults rather than kids	35	40	34
Volunteered at an event to help support the school, such as a career night	34	56	25
Volunteered as a tutor or coach at the school	20	31	16

General Public: n = 809 Parents: n = 205 Nonparents: n = 522

*Note: Has child who attends public school grade K-12. These parents are part of the general public sample.

†Note: Does *not* have either school-age or preschool children. These respondents are part of the general public sample.

ENDNOTES

1. For example, The Gallup Organization, national telephone survey of 1,004 adults conducted April 3-9, 2000. “Now I am going to read a list of some of the issues that will probably be discussed in this year’s presidential election campaigns. As I read each one, please tell me how important the presidential candidates’ positions on that issue will be in influencing your vote for president—extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not important, no opinion.” Percentage saying “extremely important” or “very important”: Education 89%; Health care 82%; Crime 81%; Social Security 80%; Family values 79%; The economy 77%; Gun control 72%; Environmental protection 66%; Tax reductions 63%; Foreign affairs 57%; Abortion 53%; Campaign finance reform 40%.
2. Farkas, Steve et al. *Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk about Parental Involvement in Public Schools*. Public Agenda, 1999. National telephone survey of 1,220 parents of children in public schools and national mail survey of 1,000 K-12 public school teachers.

For example, parents were asked: “Which is most important for parents to do in the partnership between parents and school?” Check homework and encourage children to learn: 83%; Help choose staff and develop curriculum: 4%; Volunteer to raise money and help at school: 2%; Combination/neither: 11%.

Public school teachers were asked: “Which description of the partnership between parents and school comes closer to your own?” Check homework and encourage kids to learn: 53%; Do their job at home and volunteer to do fundraising and help out at school: 28%; Do job at home, volunteer at school, and help make decisions about staffing and curriculum: 15%; Not sure: 5%.
3. Farkas, Steve. *Effective Public Engagement*. Prepared for the New Standards Project by Public Agenda, 1993. Qualitative research study based on 24 focus groups.
4. Public Agenda, *Technical Appendix: Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk about Parental Involvement in Public Schools*, 1999. pp. 31-32.

METHODOLOGY

Just Waiting to Be Asked? A Fresh Look at Attitudes on Public Engagement is based on three nationwide surveys: a mail survey of 686 public school superintendents and 475 school board members; a telephone survey of 404 K-12 public school teachers; and a telephone survey of 809 adult members of the general public. The surveys were preceded by three focus groups and a dozen individual interviews with a variety of education experts, including superintendents, school board members and presidents, and school board association leaders.

The Mail Survey of Superintendents and School Board Members

The study is based on responses from a mail survey of 686 superintendents and 475 school board members. A questionnaire was mailed on July 12, 2000, to 3,000 superintendents and 1,800 school board members. Board members were sent a follow-up questionnaire on July 31; this extra effort was made to account for the possibility that board members may not have sufficient access to their board-related mail. All responses received through August 18 were included in the final results. The response rate for superintendents is 23%; for school board members it is 26%.

The random sample of superintendents was drawn from a comprehensive list of U.S. public school superintendents. Superintendents in school districts with 2,500 or more students were oversampled to ensure that they would be sufficiently represented in the sample; 80% of the students in the country attend schools in districts of this size, and 79% of superintendents in the sample are from these districts. The random sample of 1,800 school board members was drawn from the membership list of the National School Boards Association (NSBA) located in Alexandria (VA). The NSBA's list includes approximately 50,000 names out of a universe of roughly 95,000 school board members nationally.

The margin of error for the superintendents' survey is plus or minus four percentage points; for the school board members it is also plus or minus four percentage points.

The Sample of Public School Teachers

Telephone interviews were conducted with a randomly drawn sample of 404 K-12 public school teachers across the country. The interviews were conducted between October 24 and November 12, 2000, and were 17 minutes in length. A random sample of teachers with phone numbers at their schools was provided by MDR. Teachers were called at their schools and asked for by name. If they were reached directly they were asked to participate in the survey. If they were unable to be interviewed immediately they were asked to make an appointment to be interviewed at a time convenient for them. Teachers at their schools who were not able to come to the phone were left a message asking them to call a toll free number to participate in a national survey of teachers about education. The margin of error for the teachers' survey is plus or minus five percentage points.

The Sample of the General Public and Parents

A total of 809 telephone interviews were conducted with adult members of the general public. Also reported in the study are the views of two subgroups: 205 parents of public school students in grades K-12 and 522 "nonparents"—defined as those who do not have any children school-age or younger. The interviews were conducted between October 6 and October 15, 2000, and were 15 minutes in length. They were conducted using a random sample of households and a standard, random-digit-dialing technology whereby every household in the 48 contiguous states had an equal chance of being contacted, including those with unlisted numbers. The margin of error for the 809 members of the general public is plus or minus three percentage points; for the 205 parents it is plus or minus seven percentage points; for the 522 nonparents it is plus or minus four percentage points.

The Questionnaires

The questionnaires were designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of the data reflected in this report was done by Public Agenda. As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensively pre-testing the survey instruments and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked. Both the telephone and mail surveys were fielded by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc., of Sioux Falls (SD).

The Qualitative Research

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying the public's attitudes

toward complex issues. Insights from these groups were important to the survey design, and quotes were drawn from them to give voice to attitudes captured statistically through the survey interviews.

Three focus groups were conducted in January 2000 as follows: school superintendents (Vancouver, WA); the general public (Vancouver, WA); and public school teachers (Old Bridge, NJ). In addition, a dozen formal interviews with experts—school board members and presidents, school superintendents, heads of associations, and others knowledgeable about the field were conducted to help inform the survey instruments for the focus groups and questionnaires.

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