Convening the Community

Why schools must invite the public to join the dialogue on public education

BY HARRIS SOKOLOFF

It hasn’t happened yet in New Jersey’s Flemington-Rariton School District, but the growing alienation between school boards and their communities is evident in neighboring districts. And the superintendent and board president have read about it happening around the country. Flemington-Rariton has established various structures to build stronger connections to its community. One such structure is a district advisory committee composed of community leaders. One purpose of this committee is to improve the quality and quantity of communication between the district and the broader community. And while the committee is functioning well, its members are concerned that divisions within the community might contaminate both the committee and the school board.

It is, I think, more than a little ironic that the public schools—whose local school boards are designed to give them a close link with the public—are in fact steadily losing the support of that public. The problem has become so pronounced that more than one author has asked, “Is there a public for public education?” That this question resonates can be seen in two of the most popular legislative “reforms” of education today: vouchers and charter schools. Both are touted as solutions to the problems facing our schools, but both are explicitly targeted to increasing parents’ choice while lessening the input of nonparents into the education of children. This suggests that public education is a private parental concern, not a public concern.

In contrast to this parental or private interest in education, school boards are designed as a way for the entire local community—the public—to have control over its public schools. The board structure is an explicit acknowledgment that public schools are, or ought to be, an expression of a community’s hopes and dreams for its present and future. Students and parents have the most immediate stake in the quality of local schools, but the community also has significant and legitimate interests in its schools.

The loss of the public is not unique to public education. In fact, the public seems to be shrinking in almost all sectors of our lives. And this is happening at a time when there is a marked rise in the influence of special-interest groups. This trend is so pronounced that we think it is normal and talk about competing educational interests in the same way we talk about competing brands of toothpaste or competition among telephone companies.

It is less important to know why this has happened than what we can do to turn it around. But first we must ask: What is the public’s role in public education? The public sphere has shrunk so much over the last decades that the answer to this question is not immediately obvious. But a democracy needs a strong public for at least three reasons:

1. Only the public can create and define the “public interest.” We elect people to represent us (on school boards and in legislatures), not so they can decide what they think is in the public’s interest. Rather, we elect people so they can take the public’s expression of its interest and translate it into public policy initiatives.

2. Only the public can build common ground. Given that individuals and special-interest groups do have different inter-

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ests, the general welfare requires that we, the people, be able to figure out how to set those interests aside and work for the common good. This is a task we cannot delegate to our elected officials. Rather, the public must find ways to recognize where it agrees and use those agreements to build solutions to common problems that we are willing to accept.

3. Only the public can support consistent government over the long term. The importance of a public is particularly evident here. In community after community, the school board majority shifts from election to election. First one group gets its candidates elected to the board; then, an election or two later, a new group takes control. The implications for education programs and kids are disastrous. Without a consistent board, policies and programs can change, making it difficult, if not impossible, for programs to have their intended benefits.

These three points are, of course, interconnected. The "public interest" is the common ground necessary to create consistent public policy over the long term. And without a strong, viable public, none of this is possible. Special-interest groups may claim the "public good" as one of their goals. But they are not interested in building common ground, with the necessary shared understanding that requires. They want things their way but are willing to compromise for the sake of political expediency when confronted by another, perhaps equally powerful, special interest.

More than one rapidly growing school district, for example, has found itself torn between those who have lived in the community for generations and the steady stream of people who are moving into the community. The longtime residents view this growth in many ways, including as a threat to their traditional way of life. The newcomers are moving in to create a way of life for themselves and their children. Both groups claim to want what is best for the community, but often they think in diametrically opposed ways. And each group sees the other as a threat to what it wants for the community.

Or take the parents of school-age children and those whose children are long out of school. Their battles are often fought in terms of school budgets and tax increases, with older residents focusing on the dollars and parents focusing on the programs they want for their kids. Both groups include “quality of life” arguments in their political machinations, and each demonizes the other as a threat.

No doubt you recognize your own district, or perhaps a neighboring district, in these examples. Perhaps the public is currently divided, or you see such a split emerging. Either way, first one group is likely to gain control, and then the other. This is politics as usual in late 20th-century America. And all the while, your board and administration are doing their best to protect students by providing the best possible education programs. But it is only a matter of time before the quality of those programs suffers.

There is an alternative to politics as usual. We can work to rebuild the public and its capacity to define the “public interest,” building the common ground that is necessary to create consistent public policy over the long term. This is a slow task but a relatively easy one. It requires a willingness to rethink public engagement in education. It requires a willingness to make the schools the center for public deliberation, rather than the object of political fighting.

Traditional models for public engagement with public schools are unidirectional; that is, the district drives the effort, with little or no give and take with the public. Some of these models take a marketing or public relations approach, in which the district decides what it is going to do and designs campaigns to “sell” its programs to the taxpayers.

Other models include discussion with various special-interest groups. Typically, the superintendent meets with different special-interest groups, listening to their concerns. The superintendent then sifts through all he or she has heard and recommends a course of action that filters the district’s desires and the concerns of special-interest groups into a position that makes educational sense.

Both kinds of models have their strengths, but each has a fundamental flaw: Neither acknowledges the three tasks of the public mentioned earlier. And neither builds public support over the long term.

Another model of public engagement is now gaining support across the country. This model acknowledges that the public has a responsibility for finding connections between the different self-interests represented in the community—connections that can provide the basis for long-term public support of the schools.

Imagine a community forum that provides a setting and a structure for people to deliberate an issue. The issue can be directly related to schools—such as values in schools or what students ought to learn. Or the issue can be a community concern—such as adolescent violence or the family. Or it might be a broader national concern—such as what to do about our retirement system or affirmative action. Regardless, the important thing is to make sure a broad spectrum of community interests is present and to structure the forum to encourage deliberation.

Deliberation requires a thoughtful consideration of different views on an issue. It involves weighing the pros and cons of each view, working through different perspectives, and seeing where people agree and disagree. Those areas of agreement—what some call common ground—become the basis for common action. The fact that people from different special-interest groups deliberate in public to create common ground enables them to work more constructively with each other to decide what trade-offs they are willing to make and to resolve areas of tension. This builds a stronger sense of the “public” in a community. Over time, this in turn enables school boards to provide more consistent leadership, which enables school staff to build stronger programs.

What might such a forum look like? In school district forums organized by the Center for School Study Councils, we strive for several common characteristics:

- **Diverse participation.** The forum should be as broadly representative as possible, including parents of gifted, typical, and special education students; community residents without children in school; representatives of different ethnic or racial minority groups; and members of different stakeholder groups, such as taxpayer groups. This diversity makes for richer deliberations, allowing more points of view to be heard. It also builds stronger trust among groups as people learn they share many basic ideas, even if they disagree on the specifics of implementation.

- **Issues that are framed in terms of three or four choices.**
The issues must be framed in ways that are clearly connected to the concerns and interests of the community and in language that makes sense to them. For example, materials from the National Issues Forums Institute typically frame issues in terms of three or four major choices or perspectives. (See the sidebar.) The choices are mutually inconsistent—you can't have all of one and still have the others. This means that in choosing among alternatives, the diverse community participants will have to make some difficult choices. But the choices are also connected in that they are based on related values. Thus, in making those difficult choices, the participants may find they share more common ground than they had thought.

- A structure that encourages deliberation. A moderator and a clear set of ground rules are essential to productive deliberation. The moderator should be someone who is seen as neutral. Board presidents, superintendents, and community leaders who are seen as partisan or invested in one part of the issue should not serve as moderators. The moderator's job is to guide the deliberations, making sure that all participants have an opportunity to share their ideas and that no one or two people dominate the forum. Deliberation requires that participants weigh the pros and cons of each choice. The moderator can help by keeping the conversation focused on the choices and making sure that all the choices are analyzed. Participants should also be encouraged to listen for understanding.

- Clear outcomes. It is important that participants start with a clear understanding of what the goals of the forum are. These goals can be modest, yet powerful. Three typical goals are: (1) a sharper understanding of the common ground, or shared direction for action, that emerges through the deliberations; (2) a clear statement of the tensions the group finds in the choices discussed; and (3) a sense of the trade-offs the participants are willing to make related to the forum issue.

Last year, with the help of the Center for School Study Councils, the Flemington-Raritan School District began this process, focusing on the question, "What is the role of schools in this community?" By the end of the last school year, the district had held three sessions that included a broad spectrum of interests in the district: PTO representatives and other parents, members of the local taxpayers groups, elderly citizens with no clear stake in schools, representatives of the business community, and more. The results of these issue-framing sessions provided the basis for a brief discussion guide. The guide outlines the main options that emerged from the issue-framing sessions, provides pro and con arguments about each choice, and, where appropriate, includes data to support each choice.

This fall, the district is sponsoring a series of deliberative community forums based on the discussion guide and including, again, members from as many of the district stakeholder groups as possible. The district hopes to learn a great deal about what the community is and is not willing to support for its schools. But just as important, the community will learn what others do and do not value. Community members will have to work through those differences, making hard choices for themselves and their community. They will have to work together to define the "public interest" and the "common ground" that can provide the basis for consistent district leadership over the long term.

The Flemington-Rariton project is just one example of how deliberative forums can be used. We have conducted similar projects involving deliberative forums on educational issues in districts around the country. In each case, the community began to work through the differences between opposing perspectives and gained greater tolerance for those differences.

Some districts use deliberative forums as a way to get the community in the habit of deliberating on difficult public issues so that when such a crisis arises, or threatens to arise, the community has a productive way of working through the inevitable differences of opinion. And when that happens—when the community has experience in public deliberation—the school board's own deliberations are easier.

Currently, there are no good models for deliberation by a public school board. It is generally expected that board members will ask factual questions and then make a decision. Alternatively, board members are expected to have clear positions (that is, after all, one way they get elected) and to fight for their positions. This approach is more like a debate and is contrary to the deliberative function that boards are empowered by law to carry out. Indeed, board members might like to spend more time deliberating, but they often find the public impatient with such a process. Deliberative community forums can reverse this impatience by giving citizens a different model for dealing with the issues. Boards can then use the model to arrive at decisions that reflect not only the school system's informed opinion but also the public's significant and legitimate interests.

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**Framing the discussion**

To engage community members in meaningful discussion of issues, the nonpartisan, nonprofit National Issues Forums Institute in Dayton, Ohio, frames topics in terms of three or four different perspectives. Here is a brief example of choices that might be posed for a discussion of value differences in the schools:

- **Choice 1**—The Pluralism Perspective: Preparing for Life in the 1990s. America has long recognized the necessity of separating church and state. In an increasingly diverse society, it is essential for the schools to remain strictly neutral and not favor any moral tradition.

- **Choice 2**—School for Virtue: An Idea Whose Time Has Come. Most Americans share certain values and agree that the public schools should teach them. Conveying a common core of civic values is a legacy of the common schools and a tradition to which we should return.

- **Choice 3**—Christian Traditionalists: Convictions of the Moral Majority. We must not water down or abandon Christian values in the name of tolerance and diversity. These are the values on which the American republic was based, and they deserve a prominent place in the nation's schools.

- **Choice 4**—Parental Choice: Breaking the Public School Monopoly. Parents have a right to raise the children according to their own values. Since we are so diverse, the only workable solution is to permit parents to choose which schools their children will attend.

For more information, contact the National Issues Forums Institute at (800) 433-4819.—H.S.