EdSource Report

MAY 1996

Californians and Their Schools: Renegotiating the Social Contract

EdSource®

Clarifying Complex Education Issues

"Do You Hear What I Hear? Including the Public's Perspective in Education Reform" was the theme of the 1996 EdSource conferences. The conference presentations provided the newest findings on public opinion regarding schools and ideas for how to use those findings to improve communications about school improvement. Those presentations form the basis for this EdSource Report.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

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Most Americans take free public schools for granted. After all, compulsory public education has been woven into the fabric of our lives and expectations for more than a century. Free public schools have been part of the social contract between communities and their schools — with educators agreeing to provide a quality education and citizens agreeing to provide the financial and other support needed to sustain good schools.

Today, however, both California's citizens and its educators express growing doubts that the other is living up to its commitment.

As evidence, the public cites checkout clerks who can not make change, low statewide achievement scores, and the large number of college freshmen needing remedial classwork in math and English. They worry about the safety of children in schools, the lack of order in classrooms, and the lack of basic skills among entry level workers. Asked to grade the state school system, two-thirds of Californians give it a C or lower, and nearly half say it needs a major overhaul.

For their part, educators say the public is not holding up its side of the contract. They cite the fact that, relative to its capacity, California's spending on education is among the nation's lowest, even though the challenges schools face are increasing. Since 1977, the state's per student expenditure has fallen dramatically in comparison to the national average.

In 1995 California ranked 42nd among the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Further, educators wonder how they can be expected to significantly improve student learning when California's citizens allow their schools to rank 50th nationally in the number of students per teacher, administrator, counselor, and librarian.

Many observers believe that the emotion-laden concerns increasingly expressed by both sides must be acknowledged and addressed. If they are not, they could continue to erode the underpinnings of the social contract — and thus threaten the viability of California's public education system. In order to advance education in California, educators must rebuild public support for schools in general and generate support for changes designed to improve them.

It does not appear that this communications problem can be fixed simply through more sophisticated public relations efforts. Instead, experts say that schools and communities must commit to a mutual re-examination of the purpose and expectations for public education.

In effect, they must do the hard work required to renegotiate the social contract.

The term "public engagement" refers to a process by which schools and the community can do just that. It consists of a long-term commitment to open, two-way conversations that make clear what the public expects of schools and what level of support schools need from parents and the public in order to meet those expectations.

This report presents a brief examination of why the public school contract may need to be re-examined. It summarizes the highlights from some recent, impartial opinion research done nationally and in California that asks what the public expects from schools and what commitment it has to them. Then it suggests ways that schools and communities can work to create public engagement around these complex issues. Much of this report is based on presentations made at EdSource's 1996 conferences, which focused on the theme of public engagement. For more information on the conferences and speakers, see the box on page 1.

At the 1996 EdSource conferences, featured researchers presented their findings on public opinion regarding education and education reform — in California and nationally. Californians experienced in bringing schools and communities together shared their perspectives. And a noted authority on public engagement offered concrete ideas on how to actively engage the public on school improvement issues. This report draws on the presentations of the featured speakers, including:

Deborah Wadsworth, Executive Director, Public Agenda. This New York-based research organization has looked closely at Americans' attitudes toward the public schools through a series of in-depth public opinion studies. For information about these findings contact:

Public Agenda
6 East 39th Street
New York, NY 10016
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Andy Plattner, Chairman, A-Plus Communications. Mr. Plattner, who served several years as the Communications Director of the National Center on Education and the Economy, specializes in helping educators listen to their communities, craft clear messages, and develop realistic long-term communications strategies to sustain public support. Contact Plattner at:

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Results from *Priority One: Schools that Work.* This study, released to the public in May 1996, examines Californian's opinions about their schools in depth. Priority One was commissioned by the California Public Engagement Partnership, an alliance of impartial organizations, including EdSource. The authors of this public opinion study are **Nancy Belden, Partner, Belden & Rusonello,** and **Vincent Breglio, Co-Founder and President, Research/ Strategy/Management, Inc.** To order a copy of the study contact:

California Public Education Partnership
c/o The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning
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TROUBLES OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS PART OF A LARGER PICTURE

California and the nation have changed in significant ways in recent decades. Broad and rapid social, demographic, and economic changes have created new conditions and challenges for all of society, including schools. Some of the most important trends are described below.

Demographic Changes

In the 1970s, America's **women left the household to join the work world** in large numbers. As home-based support systems for children decreased, the schools found themselves with enlarged responsibilities and less active parent involvement.

"Public Engagement is about crafting a new relationship with the community: treating the public as the valued customers and owners of the schools."

ANDY PLATTNER,
CHAIRMAN,
A-PLUS COMMUNICATIONS

The children attending California's schools today represent **dramatically increased linguistic and ethnic diversity.** In a single decade, from 1984 to 1994, the proportion of students from a minority population increased from 47% to 57% of California's school children. And about one-third of

the state's children speak a language other than English at home. In comparison, the U.S. average is 14% English language learners.

In addition, the state has experienced a **substantial rise in the number of children living in poverty** as real wages have declined and the number of single-parent households has increased. This increased stress on families translates directly into increased stress on schools.

At the same time, **the proportion of households with children is decreasing.** U.S. census data shows that in 1970, 56% of households included children. That had fallen below 50% by 1993. In California, the Center for Continuing Study of the California Economy recently estimated that 41% of households had children. Even more marked is the decrease in the number of voters who have children in school, which many observers place at about 25%.

These changes complicate schools' functioning in two ways. First, educators in many communities are hard pressed to teach their diverse and needy student body effectively. Second, a growing segment of the adult population, particularly the voting population, is disconnected from schools. These adults have no children attending and they have difficulty identifying with the children they see in their communities.

Further, as the nation evolves from an industrial to an **information-based economy, it demands a higher level of knowledge and skills from all workers.** The pace of this change has been very rapid, and many believe schools have not been able to adapt their teaching strategies and curricula quickly enough to keep up. Many parents and employers fear a fundamental mismatch between what children are learning in school and what they will need in order to be successful adults.

"Business ought to be interested in the health of our public schools: education is clearly an economic development issue: IBM opened its operations in San Jose 40 years ago in part because the state's public education system, both K-12 and college, was one of the best. Now, concerns about California's education system make it hard to attract workers to California."

JIM HENDERSON,
PROGRAM MANAGER,
ACADEMIC RELATIONS,
IBM

Social and Cultural Change

Each of these major transformations in American society has affected schools in profound ways. All of them have changed and increased the demands placed on educators. In addition, other important social changes — in our attitudes and behavior — are complicating the ability of schools and the public to communicate and work together.

Some scholars argue that **civic engagement** — public participation in the kind of local voluntary organizations that have long been seen as a foundation of America's social unity — **is in decline.** They say that this trend has important implications for both our quality of life and economic health. People are less involved in all types of public institutions and less likely to believe that those institutions are succeeding. In other words, schools are not alone.

Ironically, educators' past successes have also created new challenges, particularly in the most stable and affluent communities. **Increased levels of education** among the public **have fundamentally altered the balance of power** in the relationship schools have with parents and the broader public. When teachers and principals were among the most educated people in a community, parents and the public accepted their authority without much question.

Now, in contrast, many parents hold advanced degrees. While only 1 in 12 Americans held a bachelor's degree or greater in 1960, that has risen to 1 in 5, according to 1990 census data. In California, 23.4% of the population held a bachelor's degree or greater in 1990, which made the state the 9th most educated in the country. And in areas such as Silicon Valley, the proportion of well-educated parents is estimated to be much higher.

Schools today often find themselves in a parent involvement paradox. Many educators feel they do not have enough of the traditional, supportive parent help that they have come to rely on. At the same time, some educators may be uncomfortable with the increasing number of parents who assert a

right to decision-making power. This newer type of parent involvement may not fit well with schools' established ways of doing things. It may also undermine the confidence of less-educated parents who would otherwise like to become involved.

"School reform continues to throw off more heat than light, and produce more talk than results. Critics and defenders every day strap on their armor to do battle in op ed articles, books, symposia, before school boards, legislative committees, and in other public forums. And the resulting lack of consensus contributes to the current fragility of the public education system."

DEBORAH WADSWORTH,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
PUBLIC AGENDA

The last several decades have also seen a broad **cultural shift away from unquestioned respect for authority.** A number of strands, from the "don't trust anyone over 30" rhetoric of the 1960s, to the ethic of the informed consumer, to distrust of politicians and government officials, have combined to make people more skeptical and less trusting. Doctors and other professionals have felt the impact of this trend, and schools are not exempt.

Many parents, no longer intimidated by educators, are less inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt. In addition, more people feel personally "empowered" to protect their own interests and those of their children. Given the public's increasing access to information, this questioning of school operations is likely to continue and expand.

Therefore, the quality of information available to the public can have an increasingly direct and potent impact on public institutions. Many scholars point with concern to the growing American **willingness to form negative opinions about our public institutions,** often based on limited information. This tendency is fueled by the media world of sound bites and attention to conflict, and made worse by the human inclination to form general conclusions from isolated examples. For schools, this often results in negative public opinions based on incomplete or inaccurate information, and a weakened public confidence that problems can be solved.

THE PUBLIC, PARENTS, AND EDUCATORS AGREE ON MUCH

As a result of these pressures, the tasks of reshaping our schools and rebuilding public support can feel overwhelming. Interestingly, recent public opinion research reveals that, despite feelings of distrust and discord, Americans still share many fundamental agreements about their public schools. A thoughtful examination of public opinion research yields important glimpses of the best places to start.

"We find significant national consensus across all major demographic groups around an agenda of very straightforward and common-sensical beliefs," reports Deborah Wadsworth, Executive Director of Public Agenda. "First, people believe that education is worth trying to save — but, first things first. So, second, their schools must be safe and orderly places in which learning can occur. Third, students must master basic skills. Americans want youngsters who can read, write, spell, and punctuate the English language, and that is *not* controversial."

Teaching the Basics

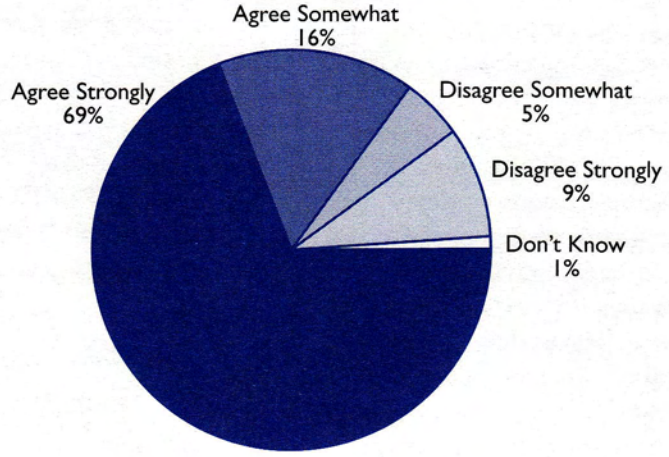
Wadsworth characterizes the "endless debate between leaders of education reform and the public over basics and standards" as "useless and counterproductive." This is not because people disagree on their importance, but precisely because they agree so strongly.

When asked by Public Agenda to rate the importance of 16 areas that might be emphasized in education, 92% of Americans say the basics are "absolutely essential." Other groups agreed overwhelmingly: 99% of economic, political, civic, and educational leaders, 98% of teachers, and 100% of school administrators ranked the basics as "absolutely essential." What is the public's definition of "the basics"? It includes reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, and computer skills. Wadsworth emphasizes that the public is saying "basics first, not basics only."

The recent California public opinion study, *Priority One: Schools That Work*, also asked people what schools should be doing. When presented with a list of 13 items and asked if they should be high school graduation requirements,

Figure 1
Californians express support for public education

"We should expect the state to provide a good public school education to all the children who now live in California."



Data: California Public Engagement Partnership EdSource 5/96

95% of Californians responded that basic math should be a graduation requirement, and 93% listed English reading, writing, and speaking.

Setting Higher Academic Standards

Firm public support also exists for higher standards. Six in ten people nationally told Public Agenda that standards are too low in their community schools. Seven in ten said schools should have tougher standards for allowing students to move from grade school to middle school, and from middle school to high school, and that these standards should be enforced by tests.

People believe that students will actually learn more and work harder as a result of higher standards. Wadsworth reports that this support is consistent across all major racial and ethnic groups, and with traditional Christians.

Teaching Civic Values a Shared Priority

Public Agenda's research also found that large majorities of Americans, from all racial and ethnic groups, support teaching a core group of values in public schools. Four out of five consider it appropriate for the public schools to teach children to respect each other's differences, that girls and boys should have equal opportunities, and that democracy is the best form of government.

In California, the *Priority One* study found that 63% of the public feels that schools should "definitely" teach an understanding of each individual's civic duty, while another 31% says they should "probably" teach it. Almost everyone said that teaching understanding and respect for people of different races and cultures should be part of the curriculum, with 79% responding "definitely." These core values are not controversial. Values education appears to be one way people would approach addressing issues of order and safety in schools.

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS UNDERMINE PROGRESS

Given so much apparent agreement on educational goals, where does the very real dissatisfaction about public schools come from? Some of the conflicts between educators and the public appear to arise out of differences in meanings and perceptions. These differences undermine society's ability to move ahead on renewing public support for improving schools.

How Well Are Academic Basics Being Taught?

Teachers and the public part company on the question of how well schools are accomplishing the goals outlined above, according to Public Agenda's research. Sixty-six percent of teachers believe that schools do place sufficient emphasis on the basics. Only 31% hold that a high school diploma does not guarantee mastery of the basics. And teachers believe that public schools out-perform private schools in 6 of 13 categories, including high academic standards and preparation for college.

This is very different from the public's perception. Nationally, 60% of the public believes that schools are not placing enough emphasis on the basics. And, while many educators are focusing on other goals, about half of the public and 65% of leaders nationwide hold that a high school diploma from their own local school does not guarantee that a student has learned the basics. When asked this question at EdSource's recent

conference, just under half of those in attendance — California's parent activists, teachers, administrators, business and foundation representatives — responded that a high school diploma does not guarantee mastery of the basics.

In addition, Public Agenda has found nationally that "the public judges private schools superior in 11 of 13 categories, especially in those areas people consider most important: safety, order, standards, and class size. And the numbers are not even close," says Wadsworth. "Perhaps most startling is the fact that almost six in ten parents with children in public school would send them to private schools if they could afford to do so."

Are Academic Standards High Enough?

Seven in ten Americans say public schools should have tougher standards for allowing students to move on in school. Most of the public views high standards as a means to an important end: ensuring that students are prepared to get good jobs in today's economy.

Wadsworth reports, however, that educators and the public also seem to be challenging each other's resolve on higher standards. "Educators continue to question whether the public really means it when they call for higher standards, while the public, based on the evidence it sees in daily life, suspects that it is the educators themselves who are undermining the standards by passing on from grade to grade students who have mastered very little. Interestingly enough, only one in ten Americans think the public schools currently expect kids to learn too much. Thus, the bottom-line message on basics and standards is, 'Just do it!'"

Differences of emphasis also exist between educators and the public. In addition to order, teachers' top worries are inadequate funding and overcrowded classrooms. And a recent poll of California school administrators by the Association of California School Administrators found that their top two concerns lay outside the schoolhouse doors: students' lack of social and emotional skills, and parents' lack of involvement.

Wadsworth sees trouble for reform efforts in these conflicting priorities. "Like the public, teachers initially express strong support for higher standards, which they genuinely believe will improve all students' performance. But teachers do not identify low standards as a widespread or particularly urgent problem, nor do they bring any real urgency or edge to improving them. As a consequence, they are unlikely to become the driving engine behind the call for higher standards."

PUBLIC TRUSTS TEACHERS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

Public Agenda's research shows that the public has confidence in local leaders to decide how schools should be run. Parents, teachers, local administrators, and school boards are most trusted to play this role. In contrast, businesses, teachers' unions, and elected officials are at the bottom of the list. The public does not want large and distant organizations to have a major role in running its schools.

"Rightly or wrongly, the public feels that the schools are no longer theirs, that they've been captured, by teachers, by reformers, by unions — someone else. They see leaders and experts as unresponsive to their concerns. And so long as these concerns go unaddressed, their resistance will continue to stiffen, ultimately leading them to abandon public education."

DEBORAH WADSWORTH,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
PUBLIC AGENDA

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY EXISTS

The public maintains its optimism that public schools can improve, but many believe significant work is required. Nearly half the respondents to *Priority One: Schools That Work* say that a top-to-bottom overhaul of local public schools is what is needed to improve the quality of education. Another 40% says minor adjustments are all that is necessary. When asked whether they were confident that public schools in California can improve over the next 10 years, 40% agreed strongly and another 38% agreed somewhat.

Such research findings provide increased understanding of

the public's sentiments about its schools. As with any poll data, the information must be critically reviewed and placed into a larger context. Nonetheless, these and other findings do provide important information about how strongly the public believes in education, how fragile that continued support may be, and where to begin rebuilding public confidence.

Public is Still Committed to the Ideal of Public Education

Priority One: Schools That Work revealed widely held support for the concept of public school. Eighty-five percent of Californians agree that the state should be expected to provide a good education to all children who now live in the state. Those polled also chose improving public schools over protecting the environment, fighting crime, and cutting taxes as the issue most important for assuring a good future for California.

Public Agenda's national research has also shown a high level of support, but with an important caveat. Their research reveals "a public still believing in the ideals of public education but increasingly poised for flight."

According to Wadsworth, "there is a window of opportunity and a basis for a common direction. Responding to the public's concerns is ... an essential ingredient in restoring public confidence and trust. The question is whether American leaders will seize that opportunity, whether we will agree that enough damage has been done and use the areas of agreement that we have identified to build a foundation for change."

Identifying Common Ground

Identifying common ground is an important first step in rebuilding the trust between educators and the public that undergirds the social contract on public education.

"There is lots of potential common ground between schools and the public," says Andy Plattner, an expert on school-community relations. "For example, the public very much wants higher standards. But parents, students, and taxpayers need to see the standards and what they mean. Abstractions just don't work. It helps immensely when people can see examples of student work, or when they can see the kinds of performance tasks that really challenge not only students but adults. This is the stuff that communicates, not speeches."

Wadsworth agrees. "The question is whether these common beliefs can rise above politics and be translated into a common public agenda for school improvement. I believe they can. Our studies make it clear that people want to make our schools work. When we put teachers, parents, community leaders, business people and school administrators together in a room, we find civil talk. We find a basis on which to build consensus and develop trust from which even more ambitious steps can be taken."

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: BUILDING UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND THE PUBLIC

Those who have studied the school-community relationship closely insist that educators cannot win back public support by simply communicating their point of view more effectively to the public. They need to listen, and respond to, the public's concerns. They must involve the public in goal-setting for schools in a meaningful way.

"This is not about more public relations," insists Plattner. "Public engagement is a mix of the best of political communication — particularly the listening and message development — and high-quality customer service."

The goal of a public engagement effort is to bring educators and the public into agreement on the top priorities for public education and on broad approaches for attaining those objectives. This is different from convincing the public that what educators want to do is right. Public engagement implies a true *conversation*. If suc-

"If you try to get support on an issue without a relationship with the community, it's going to fail. The relationship is a lot of work. It's something you develop over time, so when an issue does come up, they'll listen to you and you'll listen to them."

MICHAEL DUTTON,
GOVERNING BOARD MEMBER,
KEPPEL UNION ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT, AND PRINCIPAL,
ANTELOPE VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL

Elected officials depend on public opinion research to better understand and respond to the concerns and will of their voting constituencies. Corporations use it to track changing consumer preferences and expectations for products and services, and develop effective communication strategies. Those who seek to improve public schools can take a lesson from both.

HOW CAN UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC OPINION HELP IMPROVE COMMUNICATION ABOUT SCHOOLS?

Create a Clearer Understanding of Public Interests and Viewpoints

The more time educators and policymakers invest in learning about and understanding the perspectives of various education stakeholders, the easier and more productive their conversations with these groups are likely to be. By beginning with a clear recognition of the fears, concerns, and interests of each group — and addressing those attitudes — school communities often find they can reduce the obstacles to effective communication and more easily forge consensus on the most important issues facing students. Such understanding of public opinion can help school communities improve the quality of discussion about education in several ways.

- *Reduce mistrust.* An understanding of the motives and concerns of parents educators, voters, and other stakeholders can reduce the misunderstandings and negative reactions that often plague education discussions.
- *Reduce misinformation.* An understanding of how much the public actually knows about various education issues can help opinion leaders and policy makers decide how much emphasis they need to place on providing factual, balanced information.
- *Clarify points of disagreement.* In education discussions, individuals and groups often argue emotionally and needlessly over an apparent point of difference, only to discover that they really agree on the goal of the educational change, and only differ on the strategies they think will be effective.
- *Reduce forces of social fragmentation.* Good opinion research may reveal differences among groups, but it can also reveal areas of broad agreement. Those trying to build education support and consensus can use this information to bring groups together. This approach is most likely to yield results and to start momentum for change. Success on one effort can then create the willingness and trust needed to work out differences in other areas.

Help Educators Face Prospects for Public Support Realistically

What happens when opinion research reveals that the public does not support a plan for school improvement that educators believe in strongly? The research should suggest a framework for inquiring further about the reasons behind those views.

From that analysis, leaders can choose a rational and more informed course of action. In the afterword to *First Things First*, Public Agenda's Executive Director Deborah Wadsworth challenges education leaders to consider three possible choices.

First, it may be that the public's concerns require a genuine change in leadership's agenda to better reflect the public's beliefs and priorities.

Second, it may be that the public's resistance stems from a simple misunderstanding that can be addressed with better, more effective communications. To be effective, this communications effort needs to start with the public's concerns and priorities; be sincere, well thought out, and ongoing; and help people understand what is happening in schools and what reforms are all about.

Third, leaders may decide that the public's point of view is mistaken. Dependent as public schools are on public support, this decision demands that they then engage in a long-term effort to build support for ideas that are unpopular but worthwhile. Such an approach requires long, multi-faceted, persistent education efforts such as those undertaken about issues such as smoking, drunk driving, and environmentalism. As Wadsworth says, "This is the most difficult path of all, but it is the one that is warranted if, after honest self-scrutiny, leaders are convinced their approach — not the public's — will truly help children and their families."

To quote Wadsworth, "What will not advance the cause of public education is to dismiss the public's views out of hand or attempt to manipulate people by paying lip service to their ideas."

and involvement in schools that is essential for reform to succeed and for the public school system to thrive.

"People care a great deal about schools. They want them to be better," asserts Plattner. "Public engagement is making sure that there is some kind of agreement among the public and educators about what 'better' looks like, and keeping parents, taxpayers, and educators well apprised of the progress (or lack of progress) they're making. It takes planning, it takes effort, it takes resources, and it takes persistence. It doesn't happen in one shot. This is the kind of task that most schools or districts or even states have never done. They never had to."

Plattner characterizes a school district doing a good job on public engagement as a place where district leaders — the superintendent, staff, school board — understand what their publics think of how the schools are doing and how they should be doing.

"One of the most powerful things that educators and people who care about education can do to engage their staffs and the public is to ask them what they would need to see to believe that schools are getting better."

ANDY PLATTNER,
CHAIRMAN,
A-PLUS COMMUNICATIONS

"These leaders regularly collect data to help them understand, and they communicate clearly with the public — the owners of the system — about how the schools are doing, what changes must be made, and what these changes will mean for students, parents, and taxpayers."

Listening is the First Step

A-Plus Communications advises nearly all school districts to begin the process of public engagement the same way.

"The crucial first step is doing enough listening to understand clearly where the various elements of the public are, what they want, and what they are willing to do or not," Plattner says.

He suggests that the process of public engagement can begin with asking school staff and the public a single question: what would they need to see to believe that schools are getting better?

"That is a pretty simple question," Plattner notes. "For the general public in California, we have begun that process with the *Priority One* research. You can start asking that question now in your own community. What do people need to see to beieve that schools are getting better?"

This key question can jumpstart a meaningful conversation about schools. Schools can take the answers they receive and feed them back to the community, again asking for responses, according to Plattner. As these conditions that the public wants to see are repeated and refined, they become the basis for a renewed social contract between the school and its community.

Address Public's Concerns Directly

Plattner tells a story about working with David Hornbeck, Superintendent in Philadelphia and a nationally recognized reform expert. Hornbeck had created a ten-

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

Andy Plattner, Chairman of A-Plus Communications, offers a handful of simple questions that his clients find valuable as they produce strategic plans for public engagement:

- What are the things that different audiences need to see to believe that schools are getting better?
- How would you move your school or schools toward more of a customer orientation, and is that a valuable goal?
- If you are successful in public engagement, how would you know? What would be the proof?
- What materials do you need to communicate with each of the key audiences that you have?
- Who are the most effective messengers, spokespersons, in your school or district? A lot of times, the most effective people to speak and represent you can be students. That's who parents want to listen to.

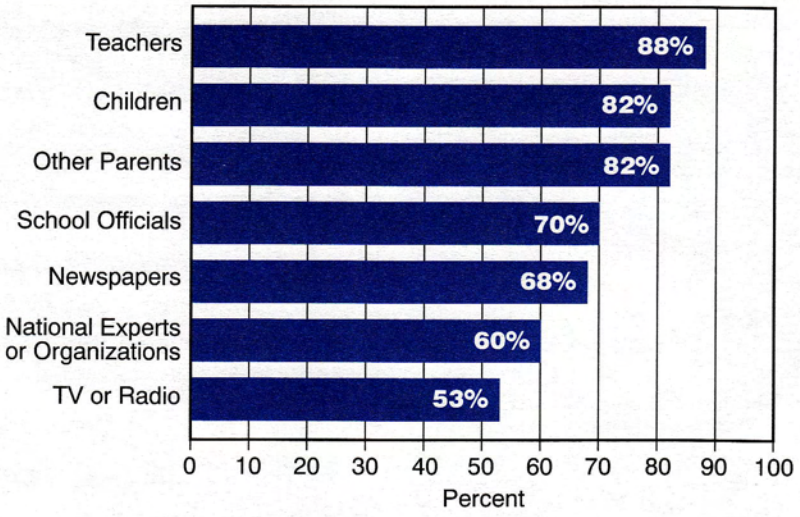
point school reform agenda called Children Achieving. He wanted the people of Philadelphia to start talking about Children Achieving. He believed that if they understood it, they would support it.

After A-Plus Communications asked the public in Philadelphia what they would need to see to believe schools were getting better, they suggested a much different approach.

Plattner recounts, "We told David to stop talking about his ten points, and to start talking about the three Bs: books, bathrooms, and bureaucracy. People, particularly parents, needed to believe that their kids had all the books they were supposed to, that they could bring books home instead of having to share them at school, as was often the case. Parents needed to see that vandalized bathrooms were fixed and that their kids felt safe using them during the day. And taxpayers needed to believe that the central-office bureaucracy was being trimmed and was spending tax dollars efficiently. Books, bathrooms, and bureaucracy: three symbols, none of which are part of the reform agenda. But if you want to have the conversation about reform, you need to deal first with these kinds of emotional symbols."

In addition, using a fairly plain vocabulary is a good idea if you want to communicate with the public, advises Plattner. "The point is not to dumb anything down. It's simply to say things clearly. Take 'systemic reform.' We might be a whole lot better off talking simply about 'improving schools.' We might be even better off if we talked about 'strengthening schools.'"

Parents' Sources of Information on Schools



Teachers are the source that the most parents rely on very or somewhat heavily for information about schools, according to research conducted by the Education Commission of the States in 1995. Students and other parents are also important sources of information.

Data: @ Education Commission of the States

EdSource 5/96

Communication Should Begin with Internal Audiences

"Often public school leaders we work with say that their main problem is in dealing with the media," says Plattner. "We usually hear that the media doesn't understand them, doesn't care, is out to get them, and refuses to print 'good-news' stories."

As a result, when Plattner began working on public engagement, he expected he would be helping schools with "external communications" — dealing with parents, the public, and the media. "But in most of the states and school districts where we work, we've learned it's far more important to focus on internal audiences — making sure you have clear two-way communications with teachers, principals, and staff."

Unfortunately, Plattner finds that most schools and districts direct their relatively limited communications resources to working with the media. They rarely invest much, if anything, in the tough work of communicating about school change and what it means to the people who will be affected by it — teachers, other staff, parents, and students. Yet that is a crucial part of making change succeed.

"Every time we do a focus group with teachers, we hear that they feel they are always the last to know about any changes," Plattner continues. "They're mad because they've read something in the newspaper before they heard it from their own organization. They're mad because their opinions, they believe, are never sought."

Opinion research has consistently shown that, for schools and districts, the messengers with the most credibility and the most access to parents are teachers. In

national public opinion research conducted for the Education Commission of the States, 88% of parents listed teachers as the group they rely on most heavily for information. The next-best messengers are students and other parents.

OPENING TALKS ON THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Meaningful communication between educators and the public is vital to repairing the frayed social contract on public schools. The essence of the contract is straightforward. Public schools exist to provide education to all the children of California, contributing to the state's social and economic health. And, increasingly, research indicates that the vast majority of people agree on the basic skills students should learn, on the need for high academic standards, and on the teaching of core civic values.

These areas of common ground can provide a positive foundation for these "contract talks," but they don't guarantee the conversation will go smoothly. In each community, and throughout the state as a whole, public education affects multiple groups with varied roles and sometimes conflicting personal and political interests.

The public's key role is to support and pay for education. It also has a responsibility to think about and articulate its priorities, and listen to educators' recommendations and concerns.

Educators are responsible for directing and operating the educational system based on the public's priorities and laws. The burden is on educators to actively solicit and carefully consider the public's point of view, and also to communicate to the public about the performance of schools and the challenges they face.

Ultimately, the outcome of these negotiations — in communities and at the state level — will shape our children's lives and the future of California. It is easy for the adults in the conversation to lose sight of that goal and focus on issues of money, power, and politics. It doesn't have to be that way.

Public engagement offers one strategy for improving the quality of our discourse and decision-making about schools. If open two-way communication is rooted in trust and a mutual commitment to common goals, California's contract to provide a quality education to all children can be effectively renegotiated.

TOWN MEETINGS TACKLE EDUCATION REFORM

Engaging Americans at the local level in civil and constructive conversation about education and the public schools is the goal of a joint project by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) and Public Agenda.

To this end, the two organizations, working with interested school districts, are developing a process and materials for holding town meetings on education reform. They are currently conducting demonstration town meetings in ten communities nationwide, including Culver City, California.

The town meetings are designed to gather together people with a variety of concerns and perspectives — teachers, parents, employers, representatives of higher education, taxpayers, and students — and to include local residents who are not typically involved in school meetings. The goal of the meetings is to help people talk though the basic values, concerns, and assumptions that underlie their views on education and school policy, rather than to consider specific questions such as bond issues or curriculum changes. These broader issues are fundamental to reaching consensus but are not addressed at typical meetings about schools.

IEL and Public Agenda have developed materials that help town meeting participants think through education and school reform issues and work together towards a consensus. They will use the experience gained from the demonstration town meetings to finalize these materials and develop information on effective strategies for engaging the public in constructive deliberation.

For more information about this project contact **IEL** at:
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EdSource is an independent, nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization which specializes in "clarifying complex education issues." Through the wide dissemination of objective, technically accurate and easily understood information, EdSource hopes to "stimulate dialogue, increase participation, and enable informed decision making on behalf of California's public schools."

For additional information related to the subject of public engagement, see these other EdSource publications:

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