JOINT VENTURES:

An Experiment in Community/Professional
Co-framing in K-12 Education

Kettering
Foundation

PUBLIC AGENDA

A report from Public Agenda in partnership
with the Kettering Foundation

Available online at: www.publicagenda.org/pages/joint-ventures

Copyright © 2014 Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization that helps diverse leaders and citizens navigate divisive, complex issues. Through nonpartisan research and engagement, it provides people with the insights and support they need to arrive at workable solutions on critical issues, regardless of their differences. Since 1975, Public Agenda has helped foster progress on school reform, teacher effectiveness, achievement gaps, parent and community engagement, and other K-12 education issues. Find Public Agenda online at PublicAgenda.org, on Facebook at facebook.com/PublicAgenda and on Twitter at @PublicAgenda.

The Kettering Foundation, established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, is a nonprofit, operating foundation that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. More information may be found on www.kettering.org.

Disclaimer: The interpretations and conclusions contained in this publication, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Kettering Foundation or Public Agenda, their directors, or their officers.

INTRODUCTION

What happens when local school leaders sit down to talk with teachers, parents, and other members of the community about the ends and means of local education? Can people bringing different perspectives and experiences to the issue agree on top goals for their communities? Can they settle on needed changes and decide what signifies genuine progress?

This memo summarizes insights from Public Agenda's work with the Kettering Foundation exploring the potential for district/community "co-framing" of local K-12 education issues. By "co-framing," we mean a process that allows leaders, professional educators, parents, and other citizens to work together to set goals, identify solutions, and assess progress. The chief questions we addressed in our research are, whether it is possible for these groups to have deeper, more deliberative conversations on improving education and learning and whether these co-framed conversations would lead to a more diverse set of solutions. We also wanted to delve into what might be needed to prompt and support such dialogue and collaborative thinking more broadly.

This co-framing project is a small-scale exploratory effort building on Public Agenda and Kettering research over the last several years, especially our work on accountability ("Don't Count Us Out: How an Overreliance on Accountability Could Undermine the Public's Confidence in Schools, Business, Government, and More" and "Will It Be on the Test? A Closer Look at How Leaders and Parents Think About Accountability in Public Schools").

These two reports suggest that the public often looks at the issue of accountability differently than policymakers and experts and shows how differing assumptions about accountability are feeding public skepticism and fostering miscommunication and cross-talk between leaders and the citizenry. The contrast seems especially clear in education where national experts and reformers have looked to a metrics-based accountability model to promote improvement in schools—a model that is often questioned by local school leaders, teachers, parents, and to a certain extent, the broader public.[1]

---

[1] See for example, Johnson, Jean, Andrew Yarrow, Jonathan Rochkind, and Amber Ott. "*Teaching for a Living: How Teachers See the Profession Today*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2009; Coggshall, Jane G., Amber Ott, and Molly Lasagna. "*Retaining Teacher Talent: Convergence and Contradictions in Teachers' Perceptions of Policy Reform Ideas*." Naperville, IL and New York, NY: Learning Point Associates and Public Agenda, 2006; Farkas, Steve, Ann Duffett, Jean Johnson, Leslie Moye, and Jackie Vine. "*Stand By Me: What Teachers Really Think about Unions, Merit Pay & Other Professional Matters*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2003; Johnson, Jean. *You can't do it alone: A communications and engagement manual for school leaders committed to reform.* Lanham, MD: R&L Education, 2012.

Can Co-framing Enrich Accountability?
Our previous research on accountability has revealed weaknesses in the prevailing model, in which leaders set specific goals and rely chiefly on metrics to measure progress.[2] One problem is that even when leaders are working hard to make improvements, statistically based accountability often seems technical, impersonal, and nonresponsive to typical citizens. Our research shows that people often feel shut out of the process, seeing few avenues for participation or comment. In this respect, this kind of accountability isn't adequate to establishing or rebuilding trust.

The other problem is that this model of accountability may be narrowing our range of solutions. By focusing so intently on test scores and other statistical yardsticks of what schools do, they imply a supplier-to-user relationship: Schools have the responsibility for educating children, and citizens and communities are largely passive consumers of educational services. There's typically little focus on the work parents and communities do to support children's learning.

Traditional metrics-based accountability systems certainly have their place. Managers and leaders need the information these systems provide and both citizens and policymakers need to know whether schools and educators are meeting certain criteria. But an overreliance on them can undercut approaches where schools and communities collaborate to nurture and educate children—where education is seen as a public good and community-wide endeavor.

This project looks at paths for overcoming these shortcomings.

---

[2] Johnson, Jean, Jonathan Rochkind, and Samantha DuPont. "*Don't Count Us Out: How An Overreliance On Accountability Could Undermine The Public's Confidence In Schools, Business, Government, and More*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2011; Johnson, Jean. "*Will It Be on the Test? A Closer Look at How Leaders and Parents Think About Accountability in Public Schools*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2013.

Project Design

This exploratory project was designed to develop and test ideas for co-framing in K-12 education and to advance our understanding of co-framing's potential. We completed two strands of research.

- **In-depth interviews with local school administrators** in diverse districts nationwide. Our earlier research showed important differences between the prevailing views among national experts and reformers on the one hand versus those of parents and the broader public on the other. However, we believed it was important to take the pulse of local educators as well before designing a co-framing discussion. Our interviews probed the perspective of local education decision makers on the national reform movement and the various accountability measures that have been instituted in recent years.

- **Co-framing field tests in four cities – Baltimore, New Orleans, Chicago, and Union City, New Jersey.** These field tests employed an innovative, deliberative focus group method to bring together parents, teachers, school administrators, businesspeople, community organization representatives, and nonparent taxpayers. In the group, participants used a Choicework methodology to discuss the mission of local education (See "The Experiment in Brief" on p. 7).[3] Public Agenda moderators led the groups in deliberative conversations on the problems facing K-12 education locally and possible avenues for addressing them. The goal was to test the ability of diverse participants to exchange views on community education issues candidly, civilly, and productively. The field tests included short post-discussion surveys of those in the focus groups and post-discussion interviews with 21 of the total 42 participants.

---

[3] Choicework discussion starters are designed to help people think and talk productively about public problems. They present discussion participants with 3 or 4 real-life approaches for tackling policy issues. For more information, visit: http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/choicework-homepage

PROMISING RESULTS, REMAINING CHALLENGES

Deliberative conversations on controversial issues among people with different perspectives and experiences are not commonplace in today's politics—and that's probably true for policymakers and professionals, as well as members of the broader public. Moreover, what passes for discussion at school board meetings and community hearings is often advocacy, venting, or speechifying rather than dialogue designed to increase understanding and build common ground for problem solving. Sometimes, these conversations are rough-edged and even raucous.

Both Kettering and Public Agenda have experimented with different ways to foster dialogue and deliberation over the years, and both organizations have reported on citizens' ability to have deeper, more meaningful conversations in circumstances that nourish and support them. In this project, we revisit the strand of work focusing specifically on the co-framing possibilities. In many respects, the results of this project are enormously encouraging. In others, the results suggest barriers that will require additional examination and raises questions for future experimentation and research. We recap our observations and conclusions from this work in four sections:

Section 1: Reviewing Stakeholder Starting Points
To ensure that we started with an up-to-date understanding of how different groups in education view the issue today, we scanned existing opinion research among key stakeholders, reviewed earlier Kettering/Public Agenda work, and analyzed themes that emerged in the interviews and focus groups conducted for this study. The goal was to review the attitudes and concerns people bring to the table so to speak. Our scan covers a range of issues, including the mission of education, standards and testing, evaluation policies, school choice and charter schools, and funding.

Section 2: Opportunities for Productive Co-framing. In this section, we report on the most promising and encouraging signs from the four co-framing field tests, based in part on post-discussion surveys and interviews of those who participated.

Section 3: Barriers to Productive Co-framing. Here we examine some of the chief obstacles and challenges to fostering more deliberative community conversations on K-12 issues, as they seem to emerge from this developmental research.

Section 4: Questions Arising from the Co-framing Experiments. We suggest seven questions that could guide additional research and experimentation.

THE EXPERIMENT IN BRIEF

To conduct these co-framing experiments, Public Agenda used an innovative focus-group process designed to capture both pre-existing responses to issues and to stimulate and then assess deliberation and dialogue. The project included these steps:

1. We conducted three-hour focus groups in May and June 2013 in four cities: Baltimore, New Orleans, Chicago, and Union City, NJ. Forty-two people participated, including parents, teachers, school administrators, businesspeople, community organization representatives, and nonparent taxpayers. All were formally recruited by professional focus-group facilities and were compensated for their time.

2. The session began with a general discussion of how participants thought about education in their communities, what they thought was going well, and where they believed improvements needed to be made. Moderators then engaged each group in a Choicework deliberation on the purposes of education in general. Participants weighed the benefits and trade-offs of four priorities for education and discussed which most reflected their views and values.

> They were:
> - Prepare students for success in the job market.
> - Expand students' horizons and help them develop a love of learning.
> - Close achievement gaps and make sure all students have the chance to excel.
> - Help students become good citizens and neighbors who strengthen their communities.

3. In the second part of the group, participants were encouraged to generate and discuss ideas for how various stakeholders in the communities could work together to improve children's education. The discussions included conversations about various stakeholders' responsibilities towards children's education, the feasibility of different plans for action, barriers and opportunities for working together, as well as deliberations over what is needed to hold diverse community stakeholders accountable for the education of the community's children.

4. After the focus groups, we conducted follow-up interviews with about half of all participants in each group including at least one parent, educator, businessperson, community organization representative, and nonparent, to learn more about how participants experienced the conversation, what they took away from it and to gauge the degree to which community stakeholders see co-framing opportunities as valuable and productive.

5. Prior to designing the plan for the focus groups, we conducted 14 interviews with principals and superintendents from rural, urban, and suburban districts nationwide to probe their views on aspects of the accountability movement, including standardized testing, teacher evaluation, school turnarounds, and vouchers. We probed their sense of how changes have both helped and hindered them in managing the schools and how they have affected school-community relationships. Because the impetus and support for statistical accountability systems has come mainly from national experts and reformers, we believed it would be valuable to understand more about how local school leaders view them and the education reform movement over all.

SECTION 1
Reviewing Stakeholder Starting Points

To provide context for thinking about co-framing, we have included a brief review of the concerns and priorities that three key groups—administrators, teachers, and parents and the broader public—bring to conversations on communities and schools.

The charts on the following pages include observations from local school leaders interviewed as part of our research, comments from participants in the co-framing experiments, and observations from previous Public Agenda and Kettering studies. To provide a more complete picture of the perspectives of the three groups, we also reviewed surveys and other opinion research conducted by other groups.

As the following summary shows, the three groups do voice different concerns and priorities about schools and the relationship between communities and schools. However, they also see eye-to-eye in some important areas. All three groups describe the main goals of education as preparing students for college and the 21st-century world of work and giving them a base of knowledge and love of learning that will serve them throughout their lives. All three groups have reservations about current accountability practices, especially using student testing as a key measure of school and educator effectiveness, and the expansion of charter schools and school choice. What's more, all three groups tend to define "community involvement" as parental involvement, as opposed to including roles for other adults or the community in general.

What is the main purpose of education?

Local School Leaders and Administrators	Their chief goals include preparing students for jobs, college, and the world. A recent survey found that more than half of school administrators see "implementing a challenging, world-class curriculum" as a key to improving schools.[4] But many also have broader educational goals in mind. A Chicago administrator said: "Students have [to have] exposure to a vast cross-section of what is really out there in terms of life, history, and culture [and they need] to be able to function in the world doing something productive."
Classroom Teachers	Many teachers think that providing students with 21st-century skills would improve academic achievement, but they see other aspects of teaching and learning as even more important.[5] A New Jersey teacher said her goal was "to reach each child's full potential and make them life ready." In Baltimore, another said: "[The aim is to] educate the whole child. You should educate them not just intellectually, but socially, emotionally, and physically."
Parents and the Broader Public[6]	Polling shows that parents broadly agree on the goals of education. There should be a strong emphasis on reading and math, science and other technical skills, communications, study habits, and critical thinking.[7] Recent surveys also show that just over half of parents believe public schools are preparing students for college and to be good citizens, and less than half believe schools are preparing students for work or adult life.[8] Confidence in public schools remains low among the broader public nationwide.[9]

---

[4] American Association of School Administrators. "*In Education, Change is the Status Quo: An AASA Survey of School Superintendents*." Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators, 2010.

[5] Scholastic, and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "*Primary Sources: America's Teachers on the Teaching Profession*." New York, NY and Seattle, WA: Scholastic and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012.

[6] In this analysis, we combine insights from parents and the broader public. There are of course important distinctions between the two. Parents generally pay more attention to education issues and view local schools more positively. But because the views of parents and the broader public do overlap in many areas—and because existing accountability systems generally omit the pivotal roles of both groups—we linked them together in this brief overview.

[7] Zeehandelaar, Dara, and Amber M. Northern. "*What Parents Want: Education Preferences and Trade-offs: A National Survey of K-12 Parents*." Washington DC: The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2013.

[8] Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. "*Parents Attitudes on the Quality of Education in the United States*." Chicago, IL: Associated Press and NORC, 2013.

[9] Jones, Jeffrey M. "*Confidence in US Public Schools at New Low*." Princeton NJ: Gallup, 2012; Bushaw, William J., and Shane J. Lopez. "*Public education in the United States: A nation divided*." *The 44th annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*. Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappa International, 2012.

Is the accountability movement heading in right direction?

Local School Leaders and Administrators	Nine in ten principals agree that, ultimately, the principal should be held accountable for everything that happens in the school.[10] But many administrators say that accountability measures, such as standards and testing need to be refined. One explained: "The reform movement is happening at such a quick pace that it's nearly impossible for us to keep up with it and inform our community in a way that makes sense and is meaningful and valuable for them." A New York superintendent complained of a lack of dialogue on how to implement accountability: "This department of education knows where it's headed, has no interest in our concerns and is determined to pursue its course with laser like focus…. I'd have to say that the policies have been much more counterproductive than useful."
Classroom Teachers	Research shows that teachers have questions about the extensive use of standardized testing, especially as a means for measuring student achievement. Many say it has some value, but is not the best way to measure student achievement and should not be used without other types of assessment.[11] "Accountability means you have to answer to them, and they have to answer to somebody," a teacher told us. "I try to ignore that as much as possible, so I can get back to teaching."
Parents and the Broader Public	Earlier research has found broad support for many of the basic elements of accountability—having students meet higher standards and making sure all students succeed and that principals and teachers are effective in their jobs.[12] But support for specific accountability measures has begun to slip.[13] And even though 45 states have adopted the new Common Core curriculum as a way to ensure that US students meet world class standards, recent polling shows that more than half of parents haven't even heard of it. Among those who are familiar with it, fewer than half think it will improve the quality of education.[14]

---

[10] MetLife. "*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership*." New York, NY: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2013.

[11] Scholastic, and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "*Primary Sources: America's Teachers on the Teaching Profession*." New York, NY and Seattle, WA: Scholastic and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012.

[12] Bushaw, William J., and Shane J. Lopez. "*A Time for Change*." *The 42nd annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*. Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappa International, 2010.

[13] Bushaw, William J., and Shane J. Lopez. "*Which way do we go?*" *The 45th annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*. Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappa International, 2013.

[14] Ibid.

Is testing improving education?

Local School Leaders and Administrators	More than 8 in 10 principals say that it is very important to use data on student performance to improve instruction.[15] But administrators are also concerned about testing's limited accuracy, its potential to be used to punish schools and teachers, and some of its negative effects on educational quality, curriculum, and relationships with parents. One principal said: "I don't have much faith in what comes out of a high-stakes test, other than how well a kid takes a high-stakes test on that specific day at that specific time."
Classroom Teachers	Even though most teachers accept the need for some testing, more than half see "too much testing" as a major drawback of teaching, and more than 7 in 10 say test scores are less important than other measures in judging student progress.[16] Only 26% of teachers say that standardized test results accurately reflect students' achievement. Less than half say that students take the tests seriously and perform to the best of their ability.[17] A New Orleans special education teacher, said: "The focus is straight on testing. It's too high of a priority."
Parents and the Broader Public	In 2010, 7 in 10 Americans said they favored annual mandatory testing in school to judge how the schools are doing.[18] But in more recent polling, less than a quarter of Americans believe that increased testing has actually helped local public schools.[19] People's mixed views on testing emerged frequently in focus groups for this project. A Chicago parent was typical: "There does need to be accountability and there does need to be some sort of way to document progress. But we've become so hyper-focused on the test. Where is the balance?" In Baltimore, a local pastor worried that "some of the curriculum is designed so that you're teaching to the test. They're really not learning anything except how to pass a test."

[15] MetLife. *"The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership."* New York, NY: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2013.

[16] Coggshall, Jane G., Amber Ott, and Molly Lasagna. "*Retaining Teacher Talent: Convergence and Contradictions in Teachers' Perceptions of Policy Reform Ideas*." Naperville, IL and New York, NY: Learning Point Associates and Public Agenda, 2006.

[17] Scholastic, and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "*Primary Sources: America's Teachers on the Teaching Profession*." New York, NY and Seattle, WA: Scholastic and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012.

[18] CBS News Poll. "*Do you favor or oppose mandatory testing of students in public schools each year as a way to determine how well the school is doing educating students?*". New York, NY: CBS, 2010.

[19] Bushaw, William J., and Shane J. Lopez. "*Which way do we go?*" *The 45th annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*. Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappa International, 2013.

Should we rate teachers, principals, and schools based on student performance?

Local School Leaders and Administrators	Most school administrators say improving the quality of teaching is the most important way to improve schools, and 76% believe teachers' salaries should at least somewhat be tied to students' achievement.[20] But many of our interviewees expressed doubts about relying on student test scores as the main way to judge teacher or school effectiveness. A South Carolina superintendent explained: "I believe that [the] growth students achieve is something we should know and assess, but I don't think you can hold teachers accountable for everything." Another in a wealthy New York suburb agreed: "Many of the things that are most important can't be assessed very well by standardized measures, if at all."
Classroom Teachers	Extensive research by Public Agenda and others suggests that majorities of teachers favor many forms of teacher evaluation and performance-based pay.[21] Even so, more than three in four also say "It's not fair to attach teacher pay to students' outcomes because so many things that affect student learning are beyond their control."[22] A New Jersey teacher said it this way: "I think that the teachers should be accountable to an extent. … At the same time, I don't feel like teachers are 100% responsible for how a child does on a test.… The majority of these kids face so many other issues outside of the walls of the schools."
Parents and the Broader Public	Some recent surveys have shown that nearly three in four Americans say teacher pay should be tied to student academic achievement, but at the same time nearly 6 in 10 also say that they oppose requiring teacher evaluations to include students' standardized test scores.[23] People often feel that judging teachers demands a more complex set of judgments. As a New Jersey parent said: "If you're going to hold the teachers accountable, what if you're a teacher that works in the school where kids face a lot of other issues. You're trying your hardest."

[20] American Association of School Administrators. "*Surviving a Thousand Cuts: America's Public Schools and the Recession*." Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators, 2010.

[21] Johnson, Jean. *You can't do it alone: A communications and engagement manual for school leaders committed to reform*. Lanham, MD: R&L Education, 2012.

[22] Coggshall, Jane G., Amber Ott, and Molly Lasagna. "*Retaining Teacher Talent: Convergence and Contradictions in Teachers' Perceptions of Policy Reform Ideas*." Naperville, IL and New York, NY: Learning Point Associates and Public Agenda, 2006.

[23] Bushaw, William J., and Shane J. Lopez. "*Which way do we go?*" *The 45th annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*. Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappa International, 2013.

Are we investing enough money in education?

Local School Leaders and Administrators	In 2010, more than 8 in 10 superintendents said their districts aren't adequately funded, and most anticipated more funding cuts in the coming years.[24] In more recent polling, principals, too, say that managing school budgets is very challenging.[25] A superintendent in suburban Chicago said: "In my case, I need money…. We're overcrowded, too." A superintendent in an affluent New York suburb talked about funding issues in neighboring lower-income districts: "The kids there are totally screwed. They don't need more tests. They need help."
Classroom Teachers	More than 6 in 10 teachers say they would like to see more federal funding and involvement in education, and research suggests that many have seen changes in their own schools because of lack of funding. For example, two thirds say there have been teacher layoffs in their school, and more than half say class sizes have increased in recent years.[26] In New Jersey, one teacher worried especially about funding for early childhood education. "There are not enough resources for the little ones," she said.
Parents and the Broader Public	"Lack of funding" is the single most common response when Americans are asked about the biggest challenge facing schools in their communities.[27] And about 4 in 10 parents say the "inequality in funding among school districts" is one of the most serious problems facing schools today.[28]A parent in suburban Chicago is representative: "I really think the biggest issue is funding. I think the way that we fund schools is—it causes a lot of inequality."

---

[24] American Association of School Administrators. "*Surviving a Thousand Cuts: America's Public Schools and the Recession*." Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators, 2010.

[25] MetLife. *"The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership."* New York, NY: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2013.

[26] MetLife. "*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Teachers, Parents and the Economy* ". New York, NY: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2011.

[27] Bushaw, William J., and Shane J. Lopez. "*Public education in the United States: A nation divided*." *The 44th annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*. Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappa International, 2012.

[28] Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. "*Parents Attitudes on the Quality of Education in the United States*." Chicago, IL: Associated Press and NORC, 2013.

What about charters, choice, and closing failing schools?

Local School Leaders and Administrators	Surveys suggest that 77% of school administrators oppose the idea of charter schools, and 81% wouldn't support a new charter school in their community.[29] Many of our interviewees expressed fear that the focus on choice and charters displaces a much-needed conversation about other educational priorities and values. Some suggest that funding for charters is unfair. A South Carolina superintendent said: "I have some grave concerns about the whole hog, open-door approach to charters. I think there are places where it works, but I don't think it's a panacea."
Classroom Teachers	Public school teachers are divided in their views on charter schools.[30] About 7 in 10 say they would prefer to teach in a regular public school as opposed to a private or public charter school, although about half say they might be interested in working in a charter run by teachers themselves.[31] Other studies suggest that public charter school teachers are more likely to leave their school than those in traditional public schools and to leave teaching entirely.[32] Interestingly, there appears to be little research on teachers' views on school choice or the idea of closing poorly performing schools.
Parents and the Broader Public	Most Americans have positive views of public charter schools[33] and parents in focus groups often have positive personal experiences with them. But there are reservations about closing schools, and many believe it would be better to try to improve troubled schools rather than close them.[34] In districts where schools have been closed, citizens often said they felt pushed out of these decisions.[35] A Chicago-area parent said: "It was like they already knew what they were going to do with this school. It didn't matter if you stood up and fought."

---

[29] American Association of School Administrators. "*Surviving a Thousand Cuts: America's Public Schools and the Recession*." Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators, 2010.

[30] Duffett, Ann, Steve Farkas, Andrew J. Rotherham, and Elena Silva. "*Waiting to Be Won Over: Teachers Speak on the Profession, Unions, and Reform*." Washington DC: Education Sector, 2008.

[31] Coggshall, Jane G., Amber Ott, and Molly Lasagna. "*Retaining Teacher Talent: Convergence and Contradictions in Teachers' Perceptions of Policy Reform Ideas*." Naperville, IL and New York, NY: Learning Point Associates and Public Agenda, 2006.

[32] Stuit, David, and Thomas M Smith. "*Teacher turnover in charter schools*." Nashville, TN: National Center on School Choice, Vanderbilt University, 2009.

[33] Bushaw, William J., and Shane J. Lopez. "*A Time for Change*." *The 42nd annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*. Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappa International, 2010.

[34] Bushaw, William J., and Shane J. Lopez. "*Public education in the United States: A nation divided*." *The 44th annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*. Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappa International, 2012.

[35] Johnson, Jean, Jon Rochkind, Michael Remaley, and Jeremiah Hess. "*What's Trust Got To Do With It? A Communications and Engagement Guide for School Leaders Tackling the Problem of Persistently Failing Schools*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2011.

What is the role of parents and communities in educating children and improving schools?

Local School Leaders and Administrators	The focus is mainly on *parent* involvement. The vast majority of principals say that engaging parents is difficult.[36] A principal in rural North Dakota spoke about the need for more connections between parents and schools: "I think if we can get people who have young children to come into the school and be involved in it … if it can start with our preschool parents, if they're involved in the school from the get-go, it tends to be longer lasting. . . . I think that [personal connections between the school and parents] are good indicators [of quality]. I think that the relationship is huge."
Classroom Teachers	Again, the focus is mainly on parents. Nearly all teachers say it's absolutely essential for parents to emphasize the importance of education and reinforce school rules for student behavior.[37] And 84% say family involvement strongly impacts student achievement. At the same time, more than 7 in 10 say it's difficult for schools to get parents and communities involved.[38] A Chicago-area parochial teacher said: "It starts at home. We do not have the parent involvement that we need." In New Orleans, a teacher wanted to reach out beyond parents. "Maybe if we could make a better connection between the school and some of the community outreach organizations, businesses, maybe that would draw the parents in."
Parents and the Broader Public	Most Americans believe families have more influence on a child's educational success than the schools, and by overwhelming margins.[39] This theme emerges repeatedly in our research. A New Jersey resident's comment is typical: "The parents are the most important educators." However, the public's actual connection to public schools is more mixed. About half of Americans say they have visited a school in the last year, and most say they know at least one public school teacher well. About one in four Americans says they have volunteered at a school in the past year.[40] Help with homework is the most common way for parents to be involved in their children's education.[41]

---

[36] MetLife. "*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership*." New York, NY: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2013.

[37] MetLife. "*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Teachers, Parents and the Economy*." New York, NY: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2012.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Bushaw, William J., and Shane J. Lopez. "*A Time for Change*." *The 42nd annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*. Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappa International, 2010.

[40] Bushaw, William J., and Shane J. Lopez. "*Public education in the United States: A nation divided*." *The 44th annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*. Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappa International, 2012.

[41] Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. "*Parents Attitudes on the Quality of Education in the United States*." Chicago, IL: Associated Press and NORC, 2013.

SECTION 2
Opportunities for Productive Co-Framing

In the four experiments conducted for this project, both educators and non-educators responded positively to the idea of deliberation and co-framing on local K-12 issues. Many seemed to see the discussion as responding to unmet needs in their own community and beyond. The following observations from the groups and post-discussion questionnaires and interviews suggest the potential of the co-framing approach.

1. Education matters to people. Most believe they have important insights to share.

Compared to policy issues like energy or global trade, which can often seem faraway and abstract to many citizens, people's feelings about K-12 education tend to be personal, sometimes even urgent and emotional. In the groups, people talked about their connections to local schools as parents, teachers, or administrators; they talked about the school experiences of other people they knew, and sometimes about their own personal experiences as students themselves. A number of people in the groups had dual roles—they were both teachers and parents with children in local schools, for example. Consequently, the conversations had a reality and immediacy that conversations on other issues sometimes do not.

Moreover, most of the participants believed they had important ideas and observations to share, and even though the groups mixed professional educators with typical citizens, few participants seemed daunted or intimidated by the discussion. In the post-discussion questionnaires, most rejected the idea that "K-12 education seems too complicated for me to understand," with nearly half strongly rejecting it. Similarly, nearly 9 in 10 said they considered themselves "well-qualified" to discuss the K-12 issues facing the country.

2. Few of the participants put the entire onus for educating children on schools alone.

Kettering/Public Agenda research on accountability in education ("Will It Be on the Test?") showed that parents and others in the community believe the responsibility for educating children extends beyond the school itself. This project provides additional evidence and examples of this widespread view. In the post-discussion questionnaires, nearly all the

participants agreed that "all community members should work together to address problems in K-12 education," with 7 in 10 agreeing strongly with this idea.[42]

Moreover, this idea surfaced repeatedly in the co-framing discussions and in interviews with school leaders in diverse communities. A New Jersey parent echoed a conviction that has emerged strongly in earlier research—the singular power of parents and the family in a child's education: "I think the love for learning starts at home.… Once they have that instilled in them … everything else falls into place. Things that are modeled at home—that all spills over into the school."

Another New Jersey parent talked about the influence of the broader community on children's learning: "The community—the streets, if you will, for a lack of a better term – are also educating the kids. Whether they are educating them in a positive way or negative way, they're educating them nonetheless." Initially, many participants focused most on the community's negative effects on children. Some saw parents in an uphill battle trying to protect their children from unwholesome, perhaps even dangerous, community influences. Only later, and only after prompting from moderators, did they begin to identify and talk about positive actions communities might take.

A retired teacher in Chicago spoke about the potential of citizens to work together to tackle education issues and other issues as well. "As individuals, I think, there are small things that we can do, but probably collectively, as a community and as neighborhoods and citizens, we probably all need to do more. That's all I can say. We need to approach our legislatures."

A principal in rural North Dakota voiced a powerful commitment to effective schooling, but also the need to do more. "I have to do absolutely everything that I can in my power, when those kids are in my school, in order to help them academically, personally, physically, emotionally, anything that I can, and that has to be a priority. [But I also need] to reach out to those families and say 'Hey, if we work in partnership together, we can make this a lot better.'"

3.   **The conversations generally started from a shared sense of what the problems are.**

These co-framing discussions intentionally mixed people with varying backgrounds and perspectives to talk about education in their communities, including administrators, teachers, parents, nonparents, businesspeople, religious leaders, seniors, and others. And yet, the groups enumerated similar goals for education, including developing a love for learning, college and job readiness, and life skills. They typically identified similar problems, including parental

---

[42] These and other findings from our post-discussion questionnaire are not generalizable statistics because of the very small sample size. We include them only to provide a general sense of the participants' responses to these conversations.

involvement, discipline, school and community cultures, resources and funding, class size, and poverty. A participant in the Union City group commented on this specifically: "Everybody had the same vision that I had about the problems in education. We all know what the problems are that we have in the system."

Whether they worked at or sent their children to parochial, charter, or traditional public schools, participants tended to have similar hopes and report similar problems. A New Orleans public charter school teacher said this in a follow-up interview: "It is interesting you brought people from the parochial side of things. I was fascinated by that. They had some solid perspectives but being a public school teacher I was just never, I've never heard that. I was fascinated."

Moreover, similar lists of aspirations and concerns surfaced across district boundaries and among people connected to different kinds of schools. In the project, we recruited participants from across district lines and found that they could easily discuss issues that are common across districts and across public, parochial, and public charter schools.

In a co-framing group in suburban Chicago, discussion often revolved around the serious problems affecting schools in the city of Chicago. Despite living in the suburbs, most of the participants seemed to see the city's education problems as affecting them as well, in one way or another. Several told us that they had moved to the suburbs specifically to avoid having to send their children to Chicago public schools. One suburban principal explained that his school was a "receiving school" for children from failing Chicago schools. "We had to take them in, and that caused a little bit of friction among parents because they were Hispanic kids."

4.   **The discussions were respectful, according to our observations and the judgments of those taking part.**

The vast majority of participants saw what we might call the attributes of dialogue in the co-framing discussions. Nearly all said that "participants could exchange views and learn from each other," with more than 8 in 10 saying this is very close to their view. Very few thought that participants showed little interest in each other's opinions (7 in 10 said this was *not at all close* to their view) or treated each other disrespectfully (again 7 in 10 said this was *not at all close* to their view). About 9 in 10 of the participants reported that they had a better understanding of viewpoints different from their own after the sessions. A Baltimore teacher commented: "You really got to hear the perspectives of others, and I didn't feel that anyone was afraid to voice their opinion."

5.   Many participants reported learning from others and reconsidering their own initial views.

It is one thing to hear different points of view as a matter or interest or curiosity and quite another to take these different perspectives seriously enough to begin rethinking your own starting point. Yet, the co-framing sessions seemed to produce enviable results in this area as well. In fact, 7 in 10 of the participants reported hearing at least 3 or 4 viewpoints that were different from their own, but that they thought had merit. About half of the participants said that the conversation had "changed the way I think about K-12 education."

In a follow-up interview, a suburban Chicago parent said she had described the co-framing session to her husband telling him that six or seven people said things that "were important to the conversation, helped me change my point of view, educated me in some way, enlightened me to some things." Her appreciation for what she learned is probably more meaningful because she was a somewhat discriminating participant who believed that some people "didn't know what they were talking about." In her view, the fact that she heard some valuable insights and ideas from 6 or 7 out of the 11 participants was considered a good outcome.

In Baltimore, a nonparent and community volunteer said the discussion had actually altered her perceptions and made her more thoughtful about education issues. "I've probably blamed certain people [for] why the school isn't where it should be. But now hearing these different perspectives and the challenges that parents, educators and community leaders go through, just waking up every day and doing their jobs, it's taught me . . . [to at least look at] their opinions and suggestions and ideas before jumping to a conclusion." In a one-on-one interview after the session, this participant said that the educators from the city had turned out to be more competent and committed than she would have assumed beforehand.

6.   The discussions were more pragmatic than ideological. As the discussions progressed, participants generally added distinctions and refinements to the questions at hand and steered clear of simplistic, global conclusions.

The conversations were often nuanced, blending different ideological approaches to education. Across the groups, participants generally agreed that low-income children and low-income schools aren't getting a fair shake, but most also pushed back on using poverty or lack of funding for schools as an excuse. Similarly, the participants pointed out the urgency and necessity of increasing parental involvement, but also acknowledged the difficulties for parents in economically stressed situations who may be working long hours just to keep afloat. A Baltimore teacher *and* parent described the tension she saw in the idea of increasing parental involvement. "Parents have schedules also. How many of us can take off, [as] teachers and go to [our] child's school? Does that make us a bad parent that we're not involved in our child's education?"

In general, people in the co-framing sessions tended to reject simplistic analyses and talk about the complications and the gray areas.

7.   **The participants were encouraged by what happened in the discussions and the prospects for building on conversations like these**.

In the post-discussion questionnaires, nearly all of the participants were enthusiastic about the possibilities arising from these types of deliberations. The vast majority agreed that:

- "Conversations like these can help people like me make better decisions about K-12 education," with nearly 6 in 10 saying this was very close to their view.
- "Conversations like these can help our country as a whole make better decisions about K-12 education," with nearly 8 in 10 saying this was very close to their view.
- "Participants in the group were willing to take responsibility for helping improve K-12 education," with more than half saying this was very close to their view.
- "Participants could come up with concrete ideas about working together to improve K-12 education," with nearly 6 in 10 saying this was very close to their view.

However, as we point out in the next section, building on this enthusiasm and capturing the energy people feel in these conversations remains one of the greatest challenges to citizen engagement, on K-12 education issues and many others.

SECTION 3
Challenges Identified in the Co-Framing Conversations

Despite the many positive and encouraging results from the co-framing experiments, there were also complications and obstacles. Here are some of the most notable:

1.   **The urgency of the conversations varied from community to community, as did the perceived need to have them. The political environments were also very different.**

When asked about problems in education today, participants in all four of the co-framing experiments touched on the same issues and returned to the same problems time and time again—issues like parent involvement, school quality, and local politics.

However, the tone and reference points among the four groups varied considerably. While this is not necessarily a barrier to co-framing, it does suggest that discussion materials and moderation need to be able to help participants move from the general to the specific at some point, and to do so effectively.

In urban districts that have experienced recent school closings or other highly charged school debates, mistrust and emotions tended to run higher; moderators need to be prepared for that possibility. Issues like violence, political corruption, language barriers, and cultures of education from immigrants' home countries were very important in some communities and less important in others.[43]

All of these are important considerations that need to be understood and incorporated into the conception, design, and implementation of co-framing projects.

2.   **The Choicework used for the co-framing was only partially effective in moving the process forward.**

For these co-framing experiments, Public Agenda used a set of choices focusing on the mission of the schools as the main discussion element for the first half of the discussion format. This Choicework was a significantly revised version of one that Public Agenda has repeatedly used to good effect in previous community conversations. Moreover, about 7 in 10 of the participants

---

[43] Johnson, Jean, Ana Maria Arumi, and Amber Ott. "*Reality Check: How Black and Hispanic Families Rate Their Schools*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2006; Johnson, Jean, Jon Rochkind, Michael Remaley, and Jeremiah Hess. "*What's Trust Got To Do With It? A Communications and Engagement Guide for School Leaders Tackling the Problem of Persistently Failing Schools*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2011; Kettering Foundation. "*Helping Students Succeed: Communities Confront the Achievement Gap*." Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2010.

found the Choicework "very helpful in guiding the discussion." Not unexpectedly, a few criticized the Choicework as "really broad" in follow-up interviews. Several complained it wasn't specific to the community they lived in.

But Public Agenda moderators and observers also raised questions about the effectiveness of the Choicework. One serious issue is that in all four sessions one of the four choices – helping children become curious, lifelong learners – was consistently more popular than the other three combined. This meeting of the minds reduced the tension we had hoped to introduce into the deliberations and probably resulted in less discussion of some important trade-offs inherent in K-12 education issues.

Another problematic issue is that the Choicework lacked district-specific examples and trade-offs. There are enormous benefits to launching these co-framing conversations with a focus on values and aspirations, as this Choicework did. It allows people with less expertise to participate and gives all the participants a chance to step back from current controversies and reflect. But there does seem to be a point where the discussion of values needs to turn to how those values will be acted on and what should happen when you can't please everyone. We present additional thoughts and ideas about the impact of the Choicework in Section 4.

3.   **Despite the upbeat tenor of the sessions—and the enthusiastic response in the post-surveys—fundamental questions of trust remained beneath the surface.**

Previous work by Kettering and Public Agenda—especially our joint work on accountability and Public Agenda's study of community views on closing schools[44]—demonstrates that mistrust is a potent factor in K-12 education debates and a profound barrier to community problem solving. Although the ground rules set by moderators, the use of choices as a starting point, and the general good will of the participants mitigated some of this mistrust in the co-framing experiments, it remained beneath the surface. In many respects, one takeaway from the project is that participants could have productive conversation in spite of their biases, misgivings, and suspicions.

In one-on-one follow-up interviews, participants were sometimes more candid about their deeper concerns and reactions. Some community members, for example, told us in follow-up interviews that they felt miffed by other participants' comments suggesting that schools are underperforming, that parents are uninvolved, or that teens or single mothers are bad parents. Some educators said they were disturbed to hear others in the group say that teachers lack dedication or are doing the bare minimum to get by. A few upper middle-class, white participants told us that they held back during the discussions for fear of offending minority or lower-income participants. In at least one case, a charter school teacher was concerned that

---

[44] Johnson, Jean, Jon Rochkind, Michael Remaley, and Jeremiah Hess. "*What's Trust Got To Do With It? A Communications and Engagement Guide for School Leaders Tackling the Problem of Persistently Failing Schools.*" New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2011.

being too frank could cost him his job. "All I have is a handshake as far as whether or not I have a job in August," he told us.

Another sign of lack of trust was the recurrent focus on the problem of "politics" in local education. This often seemed to be an indicator that the participants felt that some groups— elected officials, school administrators, teachers' unions, more affluent residents—had an outsized influence or some advantage in the schools to the detriment of others.

In instance after instance, these references to politics were basically markers for a lack of trust in another stakeholder group. The weariness and suspicion of one New Orleans businesswoman spilled out in a follow-up interview. What's to be gained, she asked, by "more talk, more counsel sessions, more meetings, more politicians lying about what they're going to do, more officials stealing money that's supposed to be for education." Her distrust undermined her belief that progress was possible.

Yet even with these undercurrents of uncertainty, suspicion, and wariness, the vast majority of the participants seemed to value the conversations that took place in the room. It is possible that mistrust would ease with repeated meetings and more familiarity among the participants. Perhaps the co-framing protocol should allow some space to discuss some of these concerns more candidly. However, mistrust that has developed over years and even decades will continue to constitute a significant barrier to community co-framing and problem solving. In those cases, it seems most likely that trust will build slowly over time *if* well-designed conversations become the norm rather than the exception *and if* such dialogues are followed up with actions that lead toward better educational results. Even if the actions are modest and the results incremental, so long as it is clear to community members and professionals alike that they are pointing inexorably in the right direction, we would expect trust to regenerate and solidify.

4. **Some K-12 education controversies are complex and technical, at which point there's a tendency to defer to professional educators and "experts."**

Although the co-framing conversations began by focusing mainly on questions of mission and values, in contrast to specific K-12 legislative or administrative issues, it is undeniable that there are complicated, often technical, issues in this field. Some stem from the use of jargon and terms of art in the field—Adequate Yearly Progress, Race to the Top, and others. Some involve questions of fact: Has school funding increased or decreased? Are American students falling behind their West European and Asian counterparts in math and science? Others simply reflect the fact that the professional educators in the room often had more specific knowledge about what was happening in local schools than the other participants or more expertise in the intricacies of testing and the like.

These issues raise questions about the role of expertise in co-framing and community problem solving. In the post-discussion questionnaires, the participants were divided on the degree to which experts should play a greater or a reduced role in decisions about local education. About half said, "Decisions about K-12 education should be made by experts." A New Orleans pastor and charter school parent was perhaps representative of this point of view when he stated: "When I think about education, [the word] *overwhelmed* comes to mind, just because of the complexity of it." At the same time, about half of the participants agreed that experts don't really care "what people like me think," implying at least some level of resentment about the role experts play in this issue and perhaps in others.

In follow-up interviews, some educators told us they had refrained from giving more facts and explanations in the groups in order to avoid dampening the discussion or turning it into a Q & A. There were instances in which some parents clearly deferred to the views of educators. The bottom line is that the influence of experts—and our genuine need for their insights, experience, and information—is a factor that co-framing projects will need to think through and address. Even in these more open conversations, there is still a strong tendency to think that "the experts have the answer," whether or not they actually do. One promising solution that we've experimented with in some settings is to have experts available to deliberators as a resource, rather than as participants, to answer questions that arise during discussions.

5.   Participants use the word *community* repeatedly, but very few had concrete ideas or specific images of how communities affect schools and learning.

Teachers and administrators often discussed how parents and communities can instill good values that support education, and parents and community members also seemed to yearn for a more robust role for communities in supporting schools and creating environments that nurture learning. But even though there was strong, repeated interest in "community involvement," that interest rarely translated into anything specific—not even specific dreams or wish lists.

Most participants seemed to be at a loss about how to effectively cultivate the parental and community support they saw as so crucial. Some turned to ideas of advocacy, suggesting that parents and community members get together and go to their legislators.

In our interviews with local administrators, a few reported that they had invested in relationships with their communities by organizing internship programs or other school-business connections. Even so, most of their attention, perhaps understandably, was focused on their schools. For members of the public, conversations about community did not gain as much traction as discussions of parents and teachers. Groups perennially returned to issues like getting better teachers into the schools and discussing how schools could hold parents more accountable for their children's education. As a New Orleans focus-group participant said, "It is impossible for this to work if it doesn't start at home."

6.   The conversations focused mainly on parents and teachers. Other actors or options were rarely mentioned without significant probing from the moderators.

Earlier in this memo, we mentioned that people's personal connections to schools and their personal history with them as parents, students, or teachers are valuable assets in launching a co-framing conversation. Yet, in some ways, these factors are also limitations. When people think about education, they often start with their own experiences. For many, their concept of how education works has been framed almost solely by their own roles as parents, teachers, or students.

Although many in the groups recognized the influence of the larger culture (and some indicted the larger culture for undermining or not supporting education and learning), their ideas for change almost always centered on the players they knew best—teachers, parents, and students. Hardly anyone mentioned local employers or colleges or churches or seniors whose children are no longer in school. Even when they did, they mainly envisioned fairly traditional school helper and mentoring programs. Moreover, some worried that schools were using volunteers to fill in for staffing shortages and regarded these unpaid helpers as less reliable and committed than paid staff.

In these four co-framing experiments, people had different views on whether their communities were headed in the right direction. In Union City, some saw improvements in their communities, noting that the schools had become more alert to the concerns and interests of the growing Latino population. In New Orleans, many participants seemed genuinely nostalgic for a time in the past when, in the view, their communities were closer knit and friendlier.

Yet regardless of how they viewed their neighborhoods, few seemed to make a strong connection between conditions in the community and the potential to change what was happening in local schools. Hardly anyone had specific thoughts or ideas about what communities could do to support children's learning—at least not without a significant push from the moderators.

One idea that might open up the conversations to a broader array of solutions is to include more community-based organizations that have the capacity to spearhead a coherent community response to educational challenges. To the extent they are represented in the conversation, many more things can happen. One of these is that community members who become energized and activated find a foothold to leverage action—they can volunteer in some fashion with an organization that is partnering with the schools or is otherwise doing work in the community that helps with the education of children and young people (such as holding after-school activities).

7. **Public Agenda, Kettering, and the National Issues Forums have all encountered the challenge of how to build on initial enthusiasm, deepen conversations, and encourage communities to move forward. It's far easier said than done.**

The question of how to deepen and continue initial deliberative conversations—and how to translate talk into action—is a perennial quandary in our work. The challenge of moving from initial good will and interest to something long-lasting was not lost on some of the participants in the co-framing experiments. A New Orleans businesswoman made a beeline for this challenge in a follow-up interview: "Something can be gained, but who's going to execute? Who's going to see this [report]? Who's going to hear it?"

One conclusion emerging from the current work is that co-framing contains two intertwined challenges: One is how to support productive dialogue and deliberation, the other is how to connect that process to community- and school-based practices, policies, and projects aimed at helping students succeed.

SECTION 4
Questions Raised by the Co-Framing Experiments

These conversations were experiments. We recruited participants from different sectors and compensated them for their time. This enabled us to learn more about the dynamics of conversations which bring people with different perspectives and backgrounds in the context of recent education controversies and developments. It also allowed us to test and hone some practices for getting people talking and exchanging ideas productively. In many respects, the conversations were extraordinarily promising—and the participant reviews were surprisingly positive.

However, some supremely difficult questions are still before us—the most important being how a more extended version of this process could be replicated in real life. Here are some specific issues that warrant additional examination, discussion, and research.

Who should convene co-framing conversations and projects? Can districts do it?
To take the co-framing concept to the next stage, we need to identify communities with interest in working together in this way and convening institutions and organizations that have the interest and capacity to take it on. Which ones are the most likely prospects? Which would have enough credibility and trust in the community to be accepted as neutral, fair-minded conveners?

School districts and superintendents might seem to be natural conveners, and there are some pluses in going this route. Some school leaders seem to be looking for ways to bring their communities into the mission of improving education. Compared to other institutions, they are more likely to have the capacity and visibility to bring different groups together. Having districts initiate the co-framing could help persuade participants that leadership both wants their feedback and is willing to listen to it.

But there are also caveats. Given the long-standing, endemic trust issues existing in many communities, districts may or may not be the best choice. Some districts have a history of poor relations with the community—one that often carries over even though new leadership has entered the picture. Because districts are the employers of teachers and principals, they may not be able to assure key participants that they can be candid and speak their mind. Concerns about whether "what I say will get back to my principal" came up even in the confidential, focus-group settings used for this project. Furthermore, in areas where districts are geographically fragmented, using districts as a unit of analysis would run the risk of missing out on local dynamics that cut across district lines. And it would leave out the interesting connections and shared problems that affect traditional public, public charter, parochial, and private schools in the same geographic areas.

Ironically, the same issue may emerge when community groups step up to act as conveners, especially ones that have been visible and active as advocates in the past. In this case, school officials and other educators may feel that they are "walking on eggs" in an attempt to avoid public criticism and pushback. People in the community who have different concerns or opinions may not feel welcome or secure in voicing their ideas.

One possibility is to think about whether a period of trust building should precede the co-framing process, something that explores the possibilities for convening and paves the way for the dialogue itself. An initial set of smaller conversations that would be both transparent and candid might be advisable. This "pre-framing" stage might also help in tailoring the process to the particular challenges and circumstances facing different communities.

Another possibility is to think in terms of community coalitions as the conveners, rather than a particular entity. While we've never had the opportunity to formally research the question, Public Agenda's experience in supporting community dialogue suggests that this approach has a great deal of merit to it, with different coalitions making sense in different places. Such group sponsorship defuses the dynamics around any particular group's historical "baggage" and signals that this is an unusual community-and-school endeavor. In terms of the challenge of follow-up action, the coalition approach tends to create more opportunities for action (because there are multiple leaders with differing resources), but also present challenges (because there are multiple leaders, each has less core ownership of the process and may assume that "the next guy" will deal with follow-up).

How can communities get started?
Ideally, in the future, co-framing will be a normal and broadly accepted part of every community's arsenal for problem solving. Communities may start out working on a time-limited project to solve a specific problem, but our longer term vision is to develop processes that reknit groups of people together so that they routinely look (and listen) to each other as they grapple with the ongoing challenges all communities face.

That said, we are trying to jump start a different way of doing things and to show how it might work. Although this project used a single-meeting format to test an overall approach, the combined experience of both Kettering and Public Agenda shows that a single meeting—no matter how inclusive and well designed—has a limited impact. A more extended, iterative process is generally needed, with strong anchors in existing community assets and diverse local leadership.

This may be especially germane in communities where relations between schools and the broader public are troubled or chilly. Some communities may need a series of fairly intense conversations and good-faith follow-up actions to move through an early trust-building stage. They may need multiple conversations to organize a smaller coalition to move a larger process forward.

Even with the basic building blocks in place, people with diverse perspectives and interests will generally need a series of iterative meetings to move from defining and describing a problem to strategizing on how to address it and then on to organizing themselves to move solutions forward. And ideally, the process would continue as the community reassesses its progress and invites more members of the community to join them.

Who should be involved in co-framing?

When co-framing is viewed as a series of iterative conversations rather than a single mega-meeting or dialogue, there are multiple opportunities for conveners and participants themselves to identify others who need to be involved as the work continues.

In these experiments, we focused on including administrators, teachers, parents, and a variety of community residents and leaders. This proved to be a good mix, and a number of the participants specifically commented on the benefits of including people with different responsibilities for education and different perspectives and ideas about it. It seemed especially helpful to mix educators and employers, teachers and parents, and administrators and teachers, based on our observations and post-discussion interviews.

In some of the co-framing sessions, we asked the participants essentially "Who else should be in the room?" Among the ideas were more K-12 students, more recent high school graduates, more older residents, and perhaps more local residents who are not formally connected to the schools. Some school and district leaders thought it would be helpful to bring state policymakers into the mix as well, so they could get a better sense of what is taking place locally, thought it seems possible that that could affect the dialogue dynamics—how "big shots" should be integrated into deliberative processes is always tricky.

What kinds of materials and discussion aides work best? Should we think about designing a suite of discussion starters?

These four experiments confirmed what we have learned from Kettering and Public Agenda projects over the years: Offering people a set of choices to consider opens up conversations and gets people thinking in new and liberating ways.

In this project, we used a Choicework focusing on the mission of local schools to jump start a "first-step" conversation. It was designed to be an introductory, warm-up conversation for the group. Particularly, it was meant to assess whether work was needed on the "ends" questions before moving to talk about the "means."

In this light, the Choicework had advantages and trade-offs. An advantage is that most of the participants responded positively to one of the four approaches outlined, so the common ground among the people in the groups came into the fore fairly quickly. This established a platform for moving into next-stage conversations about how to work together to ensure great educational opportunities and better outcomes for local kids. The fact that people tended to rate

the Choicework highly in surveys and interviews, even if some complained that it was not concrete enough, supports this view.

One drawback is that the participants did not spend a significant amount of time grappling with the tension among the choices, and they may not have gone deep enough in confronting some of the important values and ideas contained in the other choices. It may be that we want to revisit the Choicework itself and build in more tension among the four options.

The more serious problem is that by the time the conversations turned to concrete suggestions and proposals, it was difficult to maintain energy and focus. There are a couple of reasons, but one is fairly simple and straightforward: It was late at night, and people had already been talking for a good two hours. This in and of itself argues for a series of iterative meetings, giving participants some time in between to think and refresh themselves.

A second issue is that because the experiments were conducted in focus-group settings rather than in actual community settings with school board members and community leaders welcoming people and assuring them that their ideas are critically important, people had no reason to believe that there ideas would have an impact, which probably led them to succumb to fatigue faster than they would in a true forum. Having community and school leaders welcome people to the meeting would by itself likely raise the energy level of the discussion and the desire for additional conversations and follow-through.

Given our observations of the groups, it might be useful to build in a "local strategic facts" section so that people have some basic information to work with. Some of these facts would obviously relate to their local schools—graduation and dropout rates compared to other districts, reading and math scores compared to scores in surrounding areas, and the like. Some could relate to the community itself—employment and childcare statistics as an example, as well as the community-based assets, resources, and organizations that are relevant to education.

It is not so much that this information is important in and of itself—though some of it is likely to be. Rather, the benefit is that including it may help people outside the school system enter the conversations on a more equal informational footing. It might also help people move more quickly through some of the preliminary phases of the discussion. Letting participants grapple with a few strategic facts has been very helpful in the co-framing work that Public Agenda and Kettering are currently doing on health care.

It may also be useful to have customizable elements in the discussion materials—perhaps an inventory of local community assets or a list of recent proposals that have been offered by the district and others to improve local education. We may also want to consider preparing a suite of Choiceworks that grow out of the initial mission discussion. Having additional materials to work with may help conveners build on early interest and enthusiasm. Public Agenda developed a series of discussion starter materials (in both print and video formats) through past projects on topics, such as parent involvement, after-school programming, school funding, and

school safety. This series could be updated and expanded, or we could think about preparing a series of "issue advisories" similar to those used by the National Issues Forums.

Does co-framing encourage participants to look at a broader array of solutions—beyond changes in school policy and funding?

One goal of this experiment was to learn whether a co-framing approach, where parents and other community members join in identifying problems and solutions, would result in getting a broader perspective and array of solutions on the table. Our research for *"Will It Be on the Test?"* suggests that parents in particular are looking for solutions that address parental involvement and broader social norms and concerns.

These four experiments suggest that is still a challenge. While there is broad agreement that parents and communities play a crucial role in children's learning and chances for success, it is very difficult for participants to get beyond a few quick, simplistic notions or to think about how to bring those ideas to fruition. People's ability to imagine community-based solutions and their sense of community efficacy seems to be limited and in need of strengthening.

Most people lack concrete models of robust, creative, highly-functional community-school relationships and partnerships for great educational outcomes. Nor do they have many concrete ideas about how to strengthen parental involvement when parents are stretched to their limits with work or when they themselves have not had the benefit of much education—leaving aside those rarer but tragic situations in which the parents themselves are negative influences in their children's lives.

This is the hard work that our co-framing conversations were only able to prime and anticipate. Addressing them more productively would require a longer-term engagement and perhaps a different kind of stimulus—something that builds on and goes beyond a Choicework approach.

In some communities, for example, there are programs that give parents in low-performing districts the chance to visit schools in other areas, so they can begin to imagine what's possible for their child and their community's schools. Participants in the suburban Chicago focus group actually proposed and discussed a very similar idea. Perhaps we need exchange programs of sorts, where the co-framing process includes inviting people from other districts and communities into the conversations and having local residents confer with people in other communities. Doing this face-to-face would be ideal of course, but online resources may be more practical.

Educators and community members alike see the need for a more robust relationship, and they can talk about a few ways in which that can be brought about. But their imaginations and opportunities are limited, and this in itself constitutes a major barrier to the kind of work that we embarked on here.

Are some aspects of the issue more suitable for co-framing than others?

Some themes seem more interesting and compelling to the broader community than others. Some also seem more likely to elicit a broader range of ideas for community-based action.

Clearly, people want to talk about ways to increase, strengthen, and bolster parental involvement in their children's education. And they want to talk about what can be done for students when parents, for whatever reason, cannot support their children's learning as we would hope. And in struggling communities, many people want to talk about how to counter their own community's and the larger culture's negative influences on children. Consequently, issues connected to early childhood services, after-school programs, summer learning, family supports, and others are all on the table here. In most cases, these are areas where community groups and institutions can collaborate in substantial and productive ways.

Stemming the tide of school dropouts and truancy may also be a fruitful area for co-framing— ideally you want multiple adults in at-risk children's lives to work in a concerted effort to prevent them from leaving school or being chronically truant.

At the other end of the spectrum, some traditional accountability issues may be more problematic. Research by Gates suggests important roles for parents and students in teacher evaluation,[45] but professional issues, such as teaching and principal preparation, career ladders, the specifics of recruitment and compensation policies may not be very compelling to large numbers of non-educators. They are crucially important and controversial, but they are mainly of interest to professionals themselves.

Deciding which kinds of goals and metrics should be used to measure school improvement might seem to be a natural role for the broader public, but initial experiments in this area have been disillusioning. In Public Agenda's work for "Don't Count Us Out," focus-group respondents seemed only modestly interested identifying and prioritizing accountability standards and measures. The discussions lacked energy and spontaneity and didn't seem to respond to people's genuine concerns. A study on education reform in New Jersey showed how difficult it is even for state and local administrators and teachers to articulate what is and what ought to be important for accountability in public education.[46]

---

[45] Scholastic, and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "*Primary Sources: America's Teachers on the Teaching Profession*." New York, NY and Seattle, WA: Scholastic and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012.

[46] Kloby, Kathryn. "*Lost in Translation: Exploring Stakeholder Perceptions of Accountability*." *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy* 18, no. 1 (2012): 27-45.

WHAT NOW?

Whatever the strengths of metric-based accountability from a change-management perspective, it implies—and probably encourages—a stunted form of school-community relationship. Rather than viewing parents and community as critical partners in the educational enterprise, it treats them as customers looking for market signals and thereby deciding where to shop, what to buy, and whether to complain about the product.

Co-framing implies and encourages a different relationship, one that is more full and robust, one that, we would argue, is more likely to lead to better educational outcomes, healthier communities, and more successful schools. Robert Putnam's research suggests that children flourish in states with higher social capital.[47] Our research was not designed to test this relationship, but one next step would be to do so. There are a number of possibilities including:

- Case studies of communities where school-community relations are or have become particularly healthy and robust, possibly with comparative cases in demographically similar communities where that is not the case.
- Longitudinal research where co-framing practices are put into play over a significant period of time.
- In-depth qualitative research with school and community leaders who have successfully connected dialogue to action. Making this connection remains a key challenge in the work of both Kettering and Public Agenda, but there are individuals and groups who have made impressive progress here. Public Agenda's recent case study report on high-achieving, high-poverty schools in Ohio profiles schools and administrators who have purposefully built community connections ("Failure Is Not an Option") offers some ideas for additional work.[48] A series of conversations with community change leaders might help us unlock the mystery of why so many promising conversations remain just that—promising conversations—while others lead to more genuine and long-standing connections and joint ventures.

Every Reason to Move Forward

Based on these four experiments, the idea of co-framing responds to leaders' desire for more responsive, realistic, and informed community participation. Co-framing also seems to address the public's hunger for more genuine and personal forms of communications and participation. Moreover, co-framing provides at least a partial answer to the fear that our nation and communities have become so politically and socially divided that we can no longer talk to each other—much less work together to solve problems. There is every reason to move forward.

---

[47] Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

[48] Hagelskamp, Carolin, and Christopher DiStasi. "*Failure Is Not An Option How Principals, Teachers, Students and Parents from Ohio's High-Achieving, High-Poverty Schools Explain Their Success*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2012.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

American Association of School Administrators. "*In Education, Change is the Status Quo: An AASA Survey of School Superintendents*." Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators, 2010.

American Association of School Administrators. "*Surviving a Thousand Cuts: America's Public Schools and the Recession*." Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators, 2010.

Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. "*Parents Attitudes on the Quality of Education in the United States*." Chicago, IL: Associated Press and NORC, 2013.

Bushaw, William J., and Shane J. Lopez. "*A Time for Change*." *The 42nd annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*. Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappa International, 2010.

Bushaw, William J., and Shane J. Lopez. "*Public education in the United States: A nation divided*." *The 44th annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*. Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappa International, 2012.

Bushaw, William J., and Shane J. Lopez. "*Which way do we go?*" *The 45th annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*. Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappa International, 2013.

CBS News Poll. "*Do you favor or oppose mandatory testing of students in public schools each year as a way to determine how well the school is doing educating students?*" New York, NY: CBS, 2010.

Coggshall, Jane G., Amber Ott, and Molly Lasagna. "*Retaining Teacher Talent: Convergence and Contradictions in Teachers' Perceptions of Policy Reform Ideas*." Naperville, IL and New York, NY: Learning Point Associates and Public Agenda, 2006.

Duffett, Ann, Steve Farkas, Andrew J. Rotherham, and Elena Silva. "*Waiting to Be Won Over: Teachers Speak on the Profession, Unions, and Reform*." Washington DC: Education Sector, 2008.

Farkas, Steve, Ann Duffett, Jean Johnson, Leslie Moye, and Jackie Vine. "*Stand By Me: What Teachers Really Think about Unions, Merit Pay & Other Professional Matters*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2003.

Hagelskamp, Carolin, and Christopher DiStasi. "*Failure Is Not An Option How Principals, Teachers, Students and Parents from Ohio's High-Achieving, High-Poverty Schools Explain Their Success*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2012.

Johnson, Jean. *You can't do it alone: A communications and engagement manual for school leaders committed to reform*. Lanham, MD: R&L Education, 2012.

Johnson, Jean. "*Will It Be on the Test? A Closer Look at How Leaders and Parents Think About Accountability in Public Schools*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2013.

Johnson, Jean, Ana Maria Arumi, and Amber Ott. "*Reality Check: How Black and Hispanic Families Rate Their Schools*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2006.

Johnson, Jean, Jonathan Rochkind, and Samantha DuPont. "*Don't Count Us Out: How An Overreliance On Accountability Could Undermine The Public's Confidence In Schools, Business, Government, and More*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2011.

Johnson, Jean, Jon Rochkind, Michael Remaley, and Jeremiah Hess. "*What's Trust Got To Do With It? A Communications and Engagement Guide for School Leaders Tackling the Problem of Persistently Failing Schools*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2011.

Johnson, Jean, Andrew Yarrow, Jonathan Rochkind, and Amber Ott. "*Teaching for a Living: How Teachers See the Profession Today*." New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2009.

Jones, Jeffrey M. "*Confidence in US Public Schools at New Low*." Princeton NJ: Gallup, 2012.

Kloby, Kathryn. "*Lost in Translation: Exploring Stakeholder Perceptions of Accountability*." *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy* 18, no. 1 (2012): 27-45.

Kettering Foundation. "*Helping Students Succeed: Communities Confront the Achievement Gap* ". Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2010.

Scholastic and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "*Primary Sources: America's Teachers on the Teaching Profession*." New York, NY and Seattle, WA: Scholastic and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012.

MetLife. "*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Teachers, Parents and the Economy*." New York, NY: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2012.

MetLife. "*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership*." New York, NY: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2013.

MetLife. "*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Teachers, Parents and the Economy* ". New York, NY: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2011.

Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Stuit, David, and Thomas M Smith. "*Teacher turnover in charter schools*." Nashville, TN: National Center on School Choice, Vanderbilt University, 2009.

Zeehandelaar, Dara, and Amber M. Northern. "*What Parents Want: Education Preferences and Trade-offs: A National Survey of K-12 Parents*." Washington DC: The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2013.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS:

"Ready, Willing and Able? Kansas City Parents Talk About How to Improve Schools and What They Can Do to Help"
Johnson, Jean, Jyoti Gupta, Carolin Hagelskamp, and Jeremiah Hess. New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2013.

"Will It Be on the Test? A Closer Look at How Leaders and Parents Think About Accountability in Public Schools."
Johnson, Jean. New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2013.

Community educators: A resource for educating our youth.
Harbour, Patricia Moore. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2012.

"Don't Count Us Out: How An Overreliance On Accountability Could Undermine The Public's Confidence In Schools, Business, Government, and More."
Johnson, Jean, Jonathan Rochkind, and Samantha DuPont. New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2011.

"What's Trust Got To Do With It? A Communications and Engagement Guide for School Leaders Tackling the Problem of Persistently Failing Schools."
Johnson, Jean, Jon Rochkind, Michael Remaley, and Jeremiah Hess. New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2011.

"Helping Students Succeed: Communities Confront the Achievement Gap "
Kettering Foundation. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2010.

"Transforming Public Life: A Decade of Citizen Engagement in Bridgeport, Connecticut."
Friedman, Will, Alison Kadlec, and Lara Birnback. New York, NY: Center for Advances in Public Engagement, Public Agenda, 2007.

Reclaiming public education by reclaiming our democracy.
Mathews, David. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2006.

Is there a public for public schools?
Mathews, David. Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation Press, 1996.