

CHAPTER ONE

WHOSE SCHOOLS ARE THESE?

Why should Americans think that the public schools are *their* schools? Ideally, these schools are “ours” because they are agents of the people. Their standards and goals reflect community purposes. Unfortunately, a good many people today no longer believe that they own the public schools or that they have the responsibilities that ownership implies. This is not an issue of whether people are confident that these institutions are doing a good job, feel close to them, and would pay taxes for their support. Ownership is a more fundamental issue: When people drive by a schoolhouse, will they say “this is *our* school” or only “that’s *the* school”? What they say will influence the future of public education in America. I am not suggesting that a time will come when the public schools will close their doors. Still, I wonder what kind of institutions these schools will become if they are not ours. And I wonder what will happen to communities if the schools aren’t theirs.

The Question of Ownership

At first glance, the answer to the question of whether there is a public for the public schools may not appear to be worth raising. Most Americans believe it’s essential to have schools that are open to everyone. And they send 50 million of their children to them every year.¹ Some would insist that these millions are the public for the schools. And they would add that many communities are blessed with good schools. Gallup polls suggest that the number of people who think their local schools are doing a good job has increased. I say

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 2002*, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/school/cps2002.html> (accessed April 20, 2005).

“suggest” because other research shows that this increase may be a “false positive”; the approval rate drops when challenged.²

On the other hand, many Americans remain convinced that the nation’s school system (as distinct from their local schools) is in trouble. Only 24 percent nationally give the public schools grades of A and B.³ They doubt that they can turn the situation around and fear that teachers and administrators can’t either.⁴ They point to what they see as educators’ inability to maintain discipline and uphold academic standards. On reflection, however, Americans acknowledge that schools are overwhelmed by problems not of their making: child abuse, a breakdown in the norms of responsible behavior, poverty.⁵

If we thought the schools were our responsibility, this web of problems surely would motivate us to rally around the schools. But we aren’t all rallying around the schools. Instead, a number of us have drifted away from the public schools, looking for alternatives. For example, in 2003, over a million children were taught at home; that is a significant increase over the 850,000 who were homeschooled 4 years earlier.⁶ Even those who aren’t drifting away don’t necessarily feel responsible for the schools. People without children enrolled often argue that parents are solely responsible. As for parents, they tend to feel accountable for their own children, not for children generally. Lack of a sense of collective responsibility is another symptom of the lack of a sense of public ownership.

² Public Agenda found that high levels of satisfaction with local schools evaporated at the slightest challenge or when the questions people were asked became more precise. Jean Johnson et al., *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform* (New York: Public Agenda, 1995), p. 12.

³ Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, “The 37th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes toward the Public Schools,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 87 (September 2005): 45.

⁴ Gallup Organization, *Attitudes toward the Public Schools Survey*, Phi Delta Kappa Survey (May 2003).

⁵ Peter D. Hart and David Winston, *Ready for the Real World? Americans Speak on High School Reform: Executive Summary* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, June 2005), p. 2.

⁶ The most common reason for preferring homeschooling is “concern about the environment of other schools” (31 percent). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, “1.1 Million Homeschooled Students in the United States in 2003,” *Issue Brief* (July 2004).

These are some of the reasons I continue to worry that too many Americans doubt that the public schools are really *their* schools, even if they recognize, at least intellectually, that schools serve communities as well as individuals, and even if approval of school performance has increased in recent years.⁷ I remember a man in Newark, New Jersey, who, when asked who “owned” the local school, said he wasn’t sure which level of government had jurisdiction. He was quite certain, however, that the school didn’t belong to his community; it was *not*, he said with conviction, “our school.”⁸ In his case, the lack of a sense of ownership appears to have been tinged with a sense of alienation. The foundation continues to hear echoes of this man’s reaction in its current research.

Kettering’s findings also resonate with recent studies of the relationship between the public and the public schools. For example, people don’t believe they “own” the standards that schools use to document their accountability. And Americans don’t think that current efforts at “engagement” as called for in the No Child Left Behind Act restore broad ownership of the schools. Some communities appear to have little sense of owning their schools, which people sometimes attribute to a diminished sense of community. In others, people are quick to say the schools belong to them. The contrast makes the absence of ownership more striking.⁹

The lack of close ties between the public and the schools is also evident in issues that are of deep concern to citizens but are discounted by professionals in education and proponents of reform. Jean Johnson at Public Agenda has noted a “continuing disinterest among most academics and reformers in problems of order, discipline, student motivation and civility in schools.”¹⁰ The historic agreement with

⁷ Wendy Puriefoy, “All for All: Citizens Say They Want to Support the Public Schools,” *American School Board Journal* (April 2000): 36.

⁸ Reported by a member of a Teachers College, Columbia University, research team that conducted a study of education in Newark for the Kettering Foundation in 1985-1986.

⁹ Doble Research Associates, *Who Is Accountable for Education?* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 2003), p. 10; Bryan Goodwin and Sheila A. Arens, *No Community Left Behind? An Analysis of the Potential Impact of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 on School-Community Relationships* (Dayton, OH: McREL Report to the Kettering Foundation, May 2003), pp. 23-27, 37; and Paul Werth Associates, *Final Report* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, May 5, 2003).

¹⁰ Jean Johnson, letter to the author, April 14, 2005.

citizens that the schools were to develop both mind and character seems to have been broken, a breach of contract that deepens people's perception that they can't determine the purposes of schools.

People who don't think they (or their communities) own the schools aren't necessarily indifferent to them. Schools are financed with taxes, and the quality of instruction affects property values. Americans care about both, even if they don't have children enrolled. Furthermore, although citizens may be alienated by what they consider unresponsive school bureaucracies, they may wish they *could* do something to improve the situation.

Wendy Puriefoy at the Public Education Network believes a majority of Americans are "genuinely willing to get personally involved to make schools better" because they say they will vote in school board elections and mentor students.¹¹ I believe that is exactly what people would like to do. Yet their pledges of support don't necessarily mean they have regained ownership of the schools and are no longer alienated by school systems. Americans who are alienated from the political system still vote. But their ballots should not be taken as evidence that political alienation isn't a problem.¹²

The point I am making here is that the lack of public ownership of the schools is related to but distinct from approval of their performance and general support. In attempting to make that distinction in speeches, I have tried all kinds of analogies. For example, when the hometown baseball team wins, people approve of its performance. They identify with the team, but don't think they own it; they single out the owner for criticism if the team begins to lose regularly. People also contribute to good causes like the March of Dimes. But they don't think they own the organizations. People who own houses, however, have a different relationship to them than to sports teams and charitable organizations. When the roof shingles blow off in a storm (as mine did recently), they know they are responsible for replacing them, and they either make the repairs themselves or hire someone to do the job (I hired somebody).

¹¹ Puriefoy, "All for All," p. 36. Also see Public Education Network, *All for All: Strengthening Community Involvement for All Students* (Washington, DC: Public Education Network, 2000).

¹² The lack of correlation between political alienation and voting was documented in a study done by the League of Woman Voters. League of Women Voters, "Alienation Not a Factor in Nonvoting," <http://www.lwv.org/elibrary/pub/mellman.htm> (accessed April 21, 2005).

Halfway out the Schoolhouse Door

Although most people would like to stand by the public schools, many aren't sure they can; they've moved at least halfway out the schoolhouse door.¹³ Americans believe the country needs public schools yet are torn between a sense of duty to support these institutions, on the one hand, and a responsibility to do what is best for their children, on the other. Ambivalent, they agonize over the dilemma. Reluctantly, some have decided that public schools aren't best for their children—or anyone else's.

As noted, champions of public schooling take comfort in studies like Gallup that show that a large majority of parents like their local schools.¹⁴ This finding leads to the claim that the people who criticize the public school system don't know what they are talking about because they don't have any way of judging the system as a whole. This interpretation, however, masks erosion going on under the foundations of public education. The broad mandate that once tied the schools to an array of social, economic, and political objectives seems to be losing its power to inspire broad commitment. Americans reason that if the schools can't help individual children, they certainly can't help the larger community.

The same erosion of confidence has affected other institutions. Even though people like their local representatives in Congress better than they do Congress in general, the declining confidence in our system of representative government is both real and dangerous. While I certainly hope that approval of the job the public schools are doing is on the way up, I don't think approval and a sense of ownership are the same. Public ownership implies public responsibility. Approval doesn't.¹⁵

¹³ The Harwood Group, *Halfway out the Door: Citizens Talk about Their Mandate for Public Schools* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1995).

¹⁴ Rose and Gallup, "The 37th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll," p. 45.

¹⁵ I am often asked by educators, does public ownership result in better student performance? The question itself is telling because it assumes that academic performance is the standard for measuring everything that happens in education. Some have in mind not just academic performance in general, but scholastic achievement as it is defined by standardized tests. Several studies suggest that the answer is "yes." But that answer keeps other questions from being addressed. A democratic citizenry might ask about ownership because they value it as an end in itself. That is, they might say the first test of any institution that operates in the public's name is whether it is under the direction of the public.

Even among those happy with the public school their children attend, allegiance may be only to that particular institution, rather than to the cause of public education at large. When parents in a study were asked whether they would prefer public schools or alternatives such as private schools, most—including many who had spoken positively about their local schools—said they would “take our children out of public schools if we could.”¹⁶ And one journalist wrote pessimistically, “If I had to choose, I think most children would be better off with no public schools at all than with the ones we have now.”¹⁷ A decade later, the same sentiments still appear under headlines like “Let’s Get Rid of Public Schools.”¹⁸

How Ownership Is Lost

My argument so far goes like this: Too many Americans doubt the public schools are theirs, but the schools can’t become vibrant, democratic institutions until the public reclaims them as its own. The rest of this chapter will explore the meaning and character of public ownership, why professional educators may be wary of citizens, and why communities may not have a citizenry that can take responsible ownership of the schools.

First of all, the kind of ownership I am talking about isn’t the possessive sort that might foster an adversarial relationship with professionals. Public ownership expresses itself in civic work done on behalf of education. “Owning” public education is like owning a home; owners are busy keeping up the lawn, making minor repairs, and calling in professionals for tasks they can’t handle. Owners in education do the same by providing internships for students in their businesses, organizing tutorial assistance for youngsters having difficulty in academic subjects, or participating in a seemingly trivial project like making snow cones for school-community picnics.

The nature of the work isn’t as important as the sense of ownership that motivates it is. My colleague Maxine Thomas and I learned the importance of this distinction by observing a number of meetings

¹⁶ The Harwood Group, *Halfway out the Door*, p. 13.

¹⁷ Linda Seebach, “Government Runs Schools No Better Than It Would Churches,” *Dayton Daily News*, January 19, 1995.

¹⁸ David Gelernter, “Let’s Get Rid of Public Schools,” *Virginian-Pilot*, May 22, 2005. This article was originally a special to the *Los Angeles Times*.

in which school projects were being discussed. In some, the *principal* asked for volunteers to help out with school activities like picnics. In others, *citizens* identified problems they felt obligated to solve because of the way they understood their responsibilities. Then they decided on projects and parceled out the work among themselves. Maxine and I realized that there was a qualitative difference between the two cases, and it didn't have to do with the nature of the projects. Those who made snow cones for picnics out of a sense of responsibility as community citizens were doing something more meaningful than just making the cones.

The contributions made by citizens who think they are responsible for the schools are put to their best use when educators are receptive to civic initiatives. Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen. One teacher showed her hostility to outside influences when she argued that "teaching is like brain surgery"; she didn't want the community in her operating room. When Americans reach out and their efforts are rebuffed, they usually throw up their hands and walk away.

Citizens complain that educators are preoccupied with their own agendas and inattentive to people's concerns. In one study, the participants said the "greatest obstacle" to a better working relationship with schools was "the attitude of educators, especially administrators."¹⁹ This perception intensifies people's feeling that the public schools aren't really theirs. And that makes them doubt the schools can ever be changed from the inside, even though that is what many citizens would prefer.²⁰ Schools are thought to be wedded to business as usual, a feeling so pervasive that bond issues are often rejected unless people have proof positive that specific improvements will definitely be made.²¹

Wary Professionals

Most teachers and administrators would deny that they want to keep community members out of the schools or that they are

¹⁹ Doble Research Associates, *Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade?* NIF Report on the Issues (National Issues Forums Institute, 2000), p. 2.

²⁰ Rose and Gallup, "The 37th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll," p. 46.

²¹ Gerald Johnson, "The Wrong Track: Why Alabamians Believe the State and State's Public Education Are on the Wrong Track," *Alabama School Journal* 121 (June 7, 2004): 1 and Hart and Teeter, *Equity and Adequacy*, p. 1.

indifferent to people's concerns. They would insist that they spend considerable time listening to their fellow citizens. Even so, professional educators have difficulty conceiving of a responsible public because they have little or no experience with such a citizenry. And the experience they do have with citizens makes them wary.

It didn't take Kettering researchers long to realize that teachers are often frustrated by what happens in their relationship with the community at large. Teachers see the public arena as a world of social problems that fester outside the classrooms and eventually find their way inside. The effect of these problems can be devastating. As one teacher in Houston, Texas, explained, "I spend 60 percent of my time on discipline, 20 percent on filing, and, if I am lucky, I have 20 percent left for instruction."²² School personnel say they have to shoulder more and more of the immense responsibility of raising children, even to the point of feeding and supervising them after school because parents aren't meeting their responsibilities.²³ No wonder teacher morale is low.

Other encounters with the citizenry are often equally unhappy. Teachers complain that they are captives of externally imposed reforms, with little or no voice.²⁴ And administrators, battered by interest groups, become guarded, convinced that "You can't just pull together a group of people from the community to tell educators what to do." The perception that the public has nothing to offer is apparently widespread. One veteran educator of 25 years confessed to

²² Jim Mathews, conversation with author, 1995. Also see Public Agenda, *Teaching Interrupted: Do Discipline Policies in Today's Public Schools Foster the Common Good?* (New York: Public Agenda for Common Good, May 2004).

²³ Doble Research Associates, *Expectations and Realities: An Analysis of Existing Research* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, January 2004), p. 27.

²⁴ One of the teachers who reviewed a draft of this book was very clear about the frustrations of teachers and projects to "empower" them. Reforms were handed down from on high, this teacher said; typically, she and her colleagues were only "empowered" to implement what others had decreed. When a new grant program would introduce a new set of reforms, the pattern would be repeated, leaving teachers cynical about being "done to." The foundation has found the absence of a sense of agency widespread in other groups of educators, as well as members of school boards. See Connie Crockett, "Conversations with Preview Readers of *Public Building for Public Education*" (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, June 2005).

me, “I was trained to counter influences from outside my classroom, not to work with the public.”²⁵

Scholars have pointed out that professional educators aren’t prepared to involve citizens as citizens because it doesn’t fit with the concept of democracy implicit in their training. It seems that people can get credentials in public education without ever having to consider what “public” means. And the skills they are taught, such as bargaining or negotiation, wouldn’t be useful if they did encounter a citizenry acting as a collective public rather than as an aggregation of interest groups.²⁶

I’ll say more about the tensions between citizens and educators in Chapter 3, but there are bright spots in the relationship. For instance, professionals in education usually pay attention to mothers and fathers. In fact, they often equate parents with “the public.” Listening to parents, however, is a necessary though not sufficient step toward engaging the public. Even if all the people with school-age children were supportive, it wouldn’t provide the public that the schools need because Americans with school-age children are only about one-third of the population. That is not a large enough group to provide a true public mandate.²⁷

The Absence of a Public

Maybe educators don’t see a responsible public capable of taking collective ownership in education because, in fact, there isn’t one. Communities vary in civic spirit and allegiance, and people’s allegiances (along with their jobs and social ties) may be outside the school district. Demographics also change frequently; yesterday’s city with strong institutional leaders and locally based industries might disappear. Even stable towns and neighborhoods may not have a working citizenry.

²⁵ In a discussion with reviewers of the first draft of this manuscript, it was suggested that teachers and administrators operate as the “street-level bureaucrats” described in Michael Lipsky’s *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980). The autonomy education professionals do retain comes when the classroom doors close. Anything that keeps those doors open may threaten professional autonomy.

²⁶ Connie Crockett, “Readers of *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* A Report on Three Meetings” (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, Fall 2001), p. 4 and Connie Crockett, “Notes from University Professors *Is There a Public?* November 29-30, 2001” (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation), pp. 1, 4.

²⁷ Jason Fields, *America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2003* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004), pp. 3-4.

Schools can't serve a community's purposes if citizens don't come together to make decisions about what those purposes are.

An obvious and prior issue is whether Americans are interested in being part of a citizenry that takes responsibility for its schools. A number of people, although uncertain about what steps to take, do indeed seem willing to become active citizens—*provided they can see the possibility of making a difference*. This willingness to become involved in community matters was documented in a study done for the League of Women Voters in 1999. A majority of those surveyed said they were involved, and 46 percent said they would like to be more active, while only 4 percent confessed that they wanted to be less active. Most made having a constructive influence on children their highest priority.²⁸

To find out more about whether there could be a larger public for the public schools, Kettering looked at what community groups have actually done to take ownership and at the decisions citizens have made to act on a range of issues that affect schools directly and indirectly. Some of the evidence the foundation has of what Americans would be willing to do comes from one of the National Issues Forums (NIF) where people considered a range of options for improving public schools.²⁹ Results from these forums showed that participants were willing to accept the responsibilities of ownership, which did not mean they wanted to control “the day-to-day operation of the schools.”³⁰ They wanted a closer relationship with the schools, not just as individuals but as a community. Adding to this evidence, a 2004 survey found that 57 percent of those polled said their community had come together to work on problems in education.³¹

²⁸ League of Women Voters, “Working Together: Community Involvement in America,” http://www.lwv.org/elibrary/pub/cp_survey/cp_4.html (accessed April 22, 2005).

²⁹ Although called National Issues Forums, most issues in this forum series are important to communities and require local action. The forums are convened by civic, educational, and religious organizations across the country. For more information, visit the National Issues Forums Institute Web site at <http://www.nifi.org>.

³⁰ Doble Research Associates, *How People Connect: The Public and the Public Schools* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, June 1998), pp. 2-3.

³¹ Public Education Network and *Education Week, Learn. Vote. Act.: The Public's Responsibility for Public Education* (2004), p. 5. The Kettering Foundation records also showed that of nine communities that had participated in the community politics workshop, five had worked on issues in education.

Although the studies indicate a latent sense of civic responsibility and the potential for collective action, they don't justify the conclusion that there is a public continually at work in every community. I just cited the most positive poll, which showed that 57 percent of citizens said their community had come together to work on a problem in public education. But the pollsters admitted that the responses also indicated "limited personal participation," which had actually declined between 2001 and 2004. Participation was also individual rather than collective in most cases. People counted attending sporting and other school functions as being involved. Only about one in four had worked in a civic group that supported schools. Even though 53 percent said they would be willing to join such a group, the study did not delve into what would prompt them to act on this inclination.³² Usually people added the caveat that they would get involved if they could make a real difference. But that is precisely what many say they can't do.

Other studies contend that people no longer have time for such collective projects because they are absorbed by their own private interests. And still other research has found that Americans believe that the very sense of community is being lost—though they regret it. Most recognize that they have civic obligations, even if they aren't sure that others share their sense of duty. In fact, some people are quite passionate about the need to make a difference in their community, particularly when the education of the next generation is at stake. As a man in Portland, Oregon, said to the people around him, "We sit here and we criticize public schools—they're awful, they're no good. But who the hell's going to change it?" Then he answered his own question: "We are. We're going to change it. In your life you've got to do something. Everybody's got to do something."³³

Despite citizens' frustrations over not being able to act on their concerns, I believe they know, deep down, that they and their communities are ultimately accountable for the education of a new generation—along with teachers and administrators. Note again that I said "education" rather than "schools"; Americans make a sharp

³² Public Education Network and *Education Week, Learn. Vote. Act.*, p. 14.

³³ The Harwood Group, *Halfway out the Door*, p. 19. This often-latent sense of civic duty was first reported in The Harwood Group, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1991). For a more recent study of attitudes toward public schools, see Doble Research Associates, *Expectations and Realities*.

distinction between the two. Education is learning outside the classroom as well as in; it's everyone's responsibility, everyone has a role to play in it, and so everyone is accountable.³⁴ In a meeting in Baton Rouge, a woman took this insight to its logical conclusion when she said there should be "a community strategy, not a school strategy, for educating every single child."³⁵

The Case for Public Building

Readers of *Is There?* were struck by the thought that there might not be a public for the schools ready to be engaged. The possibility that the public has to be created suggests that enlisting individuals to support the schools isn't going to be enough. Certain things have to happen in communities before Americans will see the improvements they want in education—a public has to form. And that occurs as small groups of people join forces to work on common problems, including those in education. Their example can be persuasive—over time.

If there has to be a public in order for public education to flourish, why isn't public building on the agenda of every civic organization in the country? The man who said the schools didn't belong to his community isn't the only person saying that. People's alienation from the schools is no secret. So, we shouldn't make the problem worse. If the supports for a bridge have deteriorated, sensible folk shouldn't keep driving eighteen-wheelers over it.

The encouraging news is that, although not necessarily focused on public building and ownership, a number of organizations have become concerned about the troubled relationship between the public and the schools. Their projects often fly under the banner of "public engagement." So many of these efforts have been launched that Robert Sexton, director of Kentucky's Prichard Committee, described public

³⁴ Doble Research Associates, *Summaries of Five Research Projects* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1995), pp. 1-5 and Doble Research Associates, *Take Charge Workshop Series: Description and Findings from the Field* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1993), p. 2.

³⁵ John Doble to Damon Higgins and Randa Slim, memorandum, "Report on CERI Community Leadership Workshop Baton Rouge, LA, 6/23/93," July 19, 1993, p. 4.

engagement as a “growth industry” when he surveyed the field.³⁶ Less encouraging is news that many of these projects allow individual citizens to be informed about and react to proposed reforms while seldom envisioning a collective public acting on its responsibility as owners of the schools.

Still, there are some engagement efforts that allow citizens to do more than listen and react. These efforts may have been encouraged by research showing that social capital is generated by public work.³⁷ Social capital consists of networks that link people, norms of reciprocity, and trust. The capital generated by public work on one project can be used to “fund” more collective enterprises.

Public Accountability?

Another compelling reason for public building is to stimulate public ownership of accountability. Public building increases the chances that there will be what that woman in Baton Rouge wants: “a community strategy, not a school strategy, for educating every single child.” And a community strategy implies community accountability.

Today the emphasis is primarily on professional accountability alone, which is one of the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act. It was thought that publishing standardized test scores would make

³⁶ See Robert F. Sexton, “Introduction,” in *Mobilizing Citizens for Better Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004). He reviewed the main arguments for public participation made by Anne Henderson, Richard Elmore, Paul Hill, Michael Fullan, Susan Fuhrman, David Evans, and Linda Darling-Hammond, among others.

In a report to Kettering, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning described how public engagement is defined, using media reports, articles, and the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. See Goodwin and Arens, *No Community Left Behind?*

³⁷ At Kettering we’ve found it useful to identify those sources of social capital that are political rather than just social. (Think of the difference between town meetings and choral festivals.) We have used the term “public capital” to make that distinction. Public capital grows out of networks and norms of reciprocity, just as social capital does, but is generated by public work. The literature we have drawn on for social capital includes Robert D. Putnam, “Community-Based Social Capital and Educational Performance,” in *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*, ed. Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 58-95 and Clarence N. Stone, “Linking Civic Capacity and Human Capital Formation,” in *Strategies for School Equity: Creating Productive Schools in a Just Society*, ed. Marilyn J. Gittell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 163-176.

educators more responsible by allowing parents to see and judge a school's performance.³⁸ Citizens, however, want more from the schools than academic achievement, important as that is. Picking up on what people are saying, a RAND study recommended that accountability be broadened to include "more of the public's goals for education."³⁹ That obviously requires a public that can set goals.

Although most people believe in high expectations for children and some testing, they don't consider testing alone a definitive measure of accountability.⁴⁰ Citizens want educators to be held responsible for what they do, but the word "accountability" appears to be more a legal and policy term than a concept important to people. Only 1 of 35 people involved in a recent study even mentioned accountability without prompting—and that was a school board member.⁴¹

If the public "owned" accountability—if citizens took greater responsibility for what happens in education—it could change the attitude Americans have toward schools. Public accountability is more relational than informational. That is, citizens are looking for more than the data from schools. They want a face-to-face exchange with educators and a full account of what is happening in classrooms and on playgrounds. They want to know what kind of people their youngsters are becoming as well as how they are doing academically. Americans have said that most legislated accountability measures don't do that; they still leave citizens feeling on the outside trying to look in.⁴²

³⁸ U.S. Department of Education, *Questions and Answers on No Child Left Behind: Accountability*, <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/index.html> (accessed April 10, 2005).

³⁹ Brian Stecher and Sheila Nataraj Kirby, eds., *Organizational Improvement and Accountability: Lessons for Education from Other Sectors* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2004), p. 124.

⁴⁰ Doble Research Associates, *Public Schools*, pp. 8-10 and Doble Research Associates, *Who Is Accountable for Education?*, pp. 1, 7-11.

⁴¹ Doble Research Associates, *Reframing "Accountability": The Public's Terms* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, March 2001), p. 6.

⁴² Goodwin and Arens, *No Community Left Behind?*, p. 37 and Crockett, "Readers of *Is There a Public for Public Schools?*," pp. 2-4.

If the public truly owned accountability, it would include all the owners. The accountability movement as it is now doesn't always include students or communities. Yet educating children involves so many people and forces, which no profession or group can control, that Americans are reluctant to hold any one party totally accountable. As said earlier, when Americans talk about the responsibility for education, they implicate a lot of people, not just teachers and administrators. They think of accountability as a "societal issue" rather than only a school issue.⁴³

When citizens think about accountability, they are particularly concerned with the moral commitments of educators, not just their professional or technical competence. They look for dedication, caring, and high ethical standards. People are worried that conventional accountability may absolve professionals of what citizens consider educators' higher obligations.⁴⁴ For example, studies show that people value teachers who can encourage and inspire, who can make learning come alive, who are inventive in their classrooms, and who are patient in one-on-one relationships with students. Legal accountability standards, in contrast, emphasize teacher certification in subject matter and students' scores on tests.⁴⁵

In sum, the case being made here is that full accountability can't be separated from public ownership and the public building work that generates ownership. Otherwise, accountability will serve only individuals who have children in schools. It will have less public meaning.

⁴³ Achieving high academic standards appears most likely when parents and teachers work as a team in a "'village' culture" of supporting agencies. These conditions have been found on military bases, where students do much better than their counterparts in other public schools. Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on School Achievement* (Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002), pp. 51-52.

⁴⁴ Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, *Examining the Meaning of Accountability: Reframing the Construct, A Report on the Perceptions of Accountability* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, June 2004), pp. 3-5.

⁴⁵ Jean Johnson, "When Experts and the Public Talk Past Each Other," *Connections* (Winter 2005): 27.

High Stakes

Restoring public ownership of the schools through public building is both a democratic and an educational imperative. If the schools aren't seen as part of a collective effort to carry out a collective responsibility (education), doesn't that make them something like the public utility companies that provide us with water, electricity, and gas? These companies are essential to the economy and often contribute generously to schools, but they aren't public in the way schools are supposed to be. Public schools don't merely provide another service (instruction for our children), which we pay for with tax dollars rather than out-of-pocket fees. If that were all they did, we couldn't expect a relationship with them any different from the relationship we have with the companies that provide our utilities. Legislative bodies or commissions would set tax rates and supervise school services, but public ownership would be largely in name only—and community responsibility would be meaningless. If public schools become so removed from their communities that the schools are little more than “companies” financed with government revenue, then they will mean far less than they have meant historically.

What exactly have they meant? One way to answer that question is to look at the first schools that were called “public.” Founded in the early nineteenth century, a time admittedly different from our own, the early public schools, nonetheless, were part of a still-relevant design for a democratic nation—and a still-valid strategy for establishing livable communities. Those schools had a relationship with the citizenry that has implications for schools today that struggle to engage their communities. The history of the creation of the first schools also sheds light on what the first public was like, not as an abstraction, but as a concrete, everyday citizenry-at-work. The next chapter elaborates.