Getting Ruby a Quality Public Education: Forty-Two Years of Building the Demand for Quality Public Schools through Parental and Public Involvement

ARNOLD F. FEGE
Public Education Network

In this article, Arnold Fege identifies parental and public engagement as critical to sustaining equity in public education. He traces the history of this engagement from the integration of schools after Brown v. Board of Education *in 1954 and the implementation in 1965 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act through the provisions of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). He finds that while NCLB gives parents access to data, it does not foster use of that information to mobilize the public to get involved in school improvement. Fege concludes with historical lessons applicable to the reauthorization of NCLB, emphasizing enforcement of provisions for both parental and community-based involvement in decisionmaking, resource allocation, and assurance of quality and equity.*

> I think it is very difficult for a person who lives in a community to know whether, in fact, his educational system is what it should be, whether if you compare his community to a neighboring community they are doing everything they should be, whether the people that are operating the educational system in a State or local community are as good as they should be. I think it is very difficult for a citizen to know that. . . . I wonder if we couldn't have some kind of system of reporting . . . through some testing system that would be established [by] which the people at the local community would know periodically . . . what progress had been made under this program.
>
> — U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy (1965)

Harvard Educational Review Vol. 76 No. 4 Winter 2006
Copyright © by the President and Fellows of Harvard College

> How can we reconcile democratic control of government with the technical nature of modern life? The former calls for decisionmaking by citizens or their elected representatives, the latter . . . for decisionmaking by administrators or experts. If we delegate too much decisionmaking authority to experts, administration and democracy conflict. We lose control. Yet if we delegate too little authority, we also find democracy weakened.
>
> —U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer (2005)

The 1960 Norman Rockwell *Saturday Evening Post* cover illustration became indelibly etched in the hearts and minds of the American psyche. It depicted six-year-old William Frantz Elementary School student Ruby Bridges, accompanied by federal marshals, stoically walking to her New Orleans public school past the taunts and threats of a White mob, against a wall covered with smashed tomatoes among the riot debris. Along with Ruby, African American children and their parents all over the nation were courageously testing the premises of a unanimous court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared:

> Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. . . . In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. . . . Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right, which must be made available to all on equal terms. We come to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal education opportunities? We believe that it does. . . . We conclude that in the field of public education, the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954)

For many African American parents, of course, *Brown* was never *just* about integration. It was also about educational quality and achievement. It was never just about getting Ruby into an integrated public school; parents also wanted their children to have access to public schools that provided quality education. Clearly, there were African American segregated public schools that did provide a quality education. But the dual access issues of equity — integration and academic quality — were joined by the *Brown* decision. And while *Brown* served as the federal legal underpinning for public education, its implementation required both education reform and political action, building demand to sustain the equity agenda.

Parental and public engagement is a critical element in this process of sustaining equity. It is often a civic process, one that not only focuses on volunteerism, supporting individual children, and conducting fundraisers, but also organizes and mobilizes the community; knows how to collect and evaluate school performance information; builds collaborations between the school and community; votes for education-oriented candidates; pressures the

school board and decisionmakers; knows how to "work the system"; and understands big public education issues such as equitable funding, teacher quality, instructional leadership, broad school curriculum, and modern school construction. There are some parents and communities that are much more adept at using these civic highways than others. "Power and privilege, and how they are implicated in language, culture and learning typically have been invisible in school discourse" (Boethel et al., 2003, p. 16). Yet the relationship between political clout and the quality of the public school a child attends is irrefutable (Boethel et al., 2003; Cibulka & Kritek, 1996; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sirianni & Friedland, 2005; Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunizi, 2001; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005).

It was against this vivid backdrop of integration that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the first major federal public school initiative, was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965. Eric Goldman describes this action in his book *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* as "an astonishing piece of political artistry" (Dallek, 1998, p. 200). Pushed in tandem with other antipoverty and civil rights bills that comprised the Great Society, such as the Voting Rights Act and Medicare, Johnson steered ESEA through the House — with the help of the African American chair of the House Education Committee, Rep. Adam Clayton Powell (D–NY) — by a vote of 263 to 153. Johnson's orchestration was no less evident on the Senate side, when he successfully moved the House version through the Senate with no amendments whatsoever, where it was passed 73 to 18.

To do this, Johnson deftly proposed a compromise for the contentious decades-old religious issue, which had stalled federal aid to education for almost twenty years, thereby sidestepping the legislative barrier that threatened to railroad the education bill yet again. This issue pitted certain members of the powerful church lobby, which thought any federal aid that went to public schools should also be available for parochial schools, against those who believed allowing church schools to receive taxpayer money would be a violation of the church-state clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, as decided in the 1948 U.S. Supreme Court case *Everson v. Board of Education.*[1] Johnson supported a strategy called the child benefit theory, which provided categorical federal aid not to the religious institution but to the child, in order to satisfy the Court's ruling. This maneuver obviated any parliamentary mischievousness from those opposed to federal aid to education or those who did not believe that the federal government had any business in public education, believing instead that it was a function of state and local governments. By eliminating the chance of such stalling or oppositional tactics — chiefly from southern Democratic House members who were highly skeptical of any more federal interventions, especially after Johnson was successful in moving the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, which had created mandates against discrimination in voting and in public accommodations such as hotels and restaurants — all of which could have stymied the bill in a conference com-

mittee, the legislation was able to go straight to Johnson's desk for bill signing and was passed in only eighty-seven days.

Although the bill would benefit children across the nation, and despite Johnson's rhetoric that the bill was designed to provide assistance for all public education students, he knew that the greatest beneficiaries would be poor minority children. He was proud when he signed it into law on April 11, 1965, Palm Sunday, in front of the dilapidated one-room schoolhouse in Johnson City, Texas, that he once attended. Present was his first teacher, Katie Deadrich Looney, and several Mexican American students he had taught. "By passing this bill, we bridge the gap between helplessness and hope for more than five million educationally deprived children," Johnson exclaimed. "As a son of a tenant farmer, I know that education is the only valid passport from poverty. . . . As President of the United States, I believe deeply no law we have signed or will ever sign means more to the future of America" (Johnson, 1971).

By focusing funding on the most disadvantaged students, Johnson thought that the Rubys of the country would not only gain access to a public school, but a school that would afford them an equal educational opportunity. Without specifically saying so, Johnson designed Title I to be an antipoverty measure that would provide federal resources to improve public education for poor children. To achieve this, Johnson believed that the federal government had to play a critical role, presumably because state and local school districts could not, or would not, take on this role by themselves. Title I was based on the political argument that state and federal politics favored the White middle class and excluded quality programs for low-income and minority schools and students. Nevertheless, Johnson had innate confidence that the public schools could make the changes required to improve public education for poor children (Dallek, 1998).

But not so Senator Robert F. Kennedy (D–NY), who raised questions not about the bill's goals but about who would hold the public schools accountable for change, how that accountability would be framed, and what mechanisms would ensure that the money was targeted to and spent on low-income children. During the bill's hearing in the U.S. Senate Education Subcommittee, Kennedy asked Francis Keppel, then commissioner of education, the following question: "You describe . . . the family and home background of a child and I think that does make for difficulty and creates the kind of problems that you described.[2] . . . Also would you agree that this is not restricted to that, that from your experiences of studying the school systems around the United States, *that the school system itself has created an educationally deprived system?"* (Senate Subcommittee on Education, 1965). Kennedy indicated that his support for Title I was conditioned on "holding educators responsive to their constituencies and [making] educational achievement the touchstone of success in judging ESEA" (Halperin, 1978).

Kennedy did not believe that public schools would change on their own without federal involvement. Kennedy's experiences with the public schools

were different from Johnson's. He had not attended public schools, but he had fought the states' resistance to school integration in the South when he was U.S. attorney general, and he had observed firsthand the public schools in New York. All of these experiences made Kennedy skeptical that the funding would get down to the level of poor children, or if it did, that it would serve to overturn the instructional status quo for poor children.

In committee hearings, Kennedy grilled White House officials about questions of accountability and parent involvement, thereby raising some of the first questions about the relationship between instructional quality, effective use of taxpayers' money, federal regulatory compliance, and a testing framework driven by parental demands for school improvement based on assessment and reporting information.[3] Kennedy placed his confidence in the parents of poor students, trusting that they would push for school improvement based on the information they received about how their child's school was using Title I money and how the schools were performing.

This situation created an unexpected challenge for Johnson, particularly when Kennedy began sounding as if he were urging greater federal oversight and a more involved federal role at a time when Southern Democrats were leery of additional federal entanglements with their public schools. Immediately after the *Brown* decisions, Southern politicians began a resistance movement to stymie and counter federal enforcement of integration. Johnson and Kennedy hurriedly hammered out an amendment to satisfy Kennedy's concerns. However, neither Kennedy — nor, for that matter, educators — had any answers as to what strategies would be required to hold schools accountable or what frameworks needed to be in place to motivate parents to action. But Kennedy did have a notion that schools and school districts would not reform on their own, and that parents had a right to know what was taking place in their schools and how Title I dollars were being spent. He expected that an evaluation mandate needed to be added to the bill that would provide new sources of political power that parents could use as a "whip" or a "spur" (McLaughlin, 1975). While Johnson had confidence that the public schools would know how to use Title I funds to improve the education of poor children, Kennedy let it be known he had little confidence in the ability of local school districts to change underperforming schools or to work on behalf of poor parents (McLaughlin, 1975):

> [These children] really don't have a lobby speaking for them and do not have parents that can be clamoring down here because they cannot afford to take the bus ride, or cannot afford to fly down here, and they are the ones, I think, who are of concern. They have been ignored in the past. We are fighting for them and others have; but the fact is that we are just awakening to the needs in this part of the country, and what I want to make sure of is not just that the money is not wasted, because you can find more money, but the fact that the lives of these children are not wasted. (Senate Subcommittee on Education, 1965)

In concert with Johnson's White House office and Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) officials, the "Kennedy Amendments" (Section 205 and Section 208 of ESEA) were proposed, which included both evaluation and dissemination requirements. These amendments required states to adopt "effective procedures, including provisions for appropriate objective measures of educational achievement for evaluating at least annually the effectiveness of the programs in meeting the special educational needs of culturally deprived children." They also ensured that "effective procedures will be adopted for acquiring and disseminating to teachers and administrators significant information derived from educational research, demonstration and similar projects, and for adopting, where appropriate, promising educational practices developed through such projects" (McLaughlin, 1975, p. 18). The amendments did not require parental or public participation; those mandates were added to Title I in later years.

These amendments failed for a number of reasons. They were not fully implemented, the school districts did not take them seriously because of the lack of enforcement provisions, and school districts often did not have the institutional skill and capacity to ensure their success. Even districts that did want to implement them did not know how to do it. In addition, the language was so ambiguously written that the state and local school districts used their own discretion in meeting the new federal mandate. The law did not specify what "appropriate objective measurements" might be, or even what constituted the "special educational needs of educationally deprived children." In addition, the U.S. Office of Education's role was ill-defined, and even at that, "the formulation of the Title I evaluation guidelines reflected greater concern for old, valued friendships and familiar patterns of state-federal relationships than for the ideas of reform that motivated Kennedy" (McLaughlin, 1975, pp. 18–19). A 1975 Rand Study Report on ESEA concluded "that Kennedy's notion of reform, then, was not borne out by the Title I evaluation mandate. The legislation in the largest measure did *not* make information available that could be used either by parents to change priorities of local school administrators or by the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) to oversee effective targeting of Title I funds. And USOE did not try to force local program managers to comply with the intent of the evaluation requirement" (McLaughlin, 1975, pp. 21–27).

As Title I evolved through the 1960s and 1970s, Congress and the White House attempted to strengthen and give more value to the role of parents and the community as the *political entity* responsible for holding schools accountable. In 1966, Public Law 89-750 amended Title I to include a provision for community involvement, which was followed by a 1967 report from the United States Office of Education on comprehensive school planning that related to coordination with community action groups. In 1969–1970, the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) gave the commissioner of educa-

tion the power to require parental involvement for any federally financed program that he or she felt might benefit from parental participation. In addition, Title I regulations emphasized the importance of parental involvement and strengthened public access to Title I information. In 1973, Public Law 93-380 provided that parent advisory councils (known as Title One Parent Advisory Councils, or TOPACs) were required for each school district and each school served by Title I. Parents had to elect the council members and the majority of the council had to be parents. The most stringent of the parental involvement provisions were required by the Educational Amendments of 1978. These amendments

- required parents to be involved in governance, establishment of programs, and provided with information about Title I progress and on the progress of their children;
- continued school advisory councils but also mandated the inclusion of parents of students who were eligible for Title I services and could not participate previously because of funding shortages;
- allowed the advisory councils to veto school districts' plans for the use of federal funds;
- required the local school district to work with the advisory councils in planning, implementation, and evaluation of programs; and
- provided training for council members.

The 1978 amendments were the most comprehensive and far-reaching of any of the Title I mandates related to parental involvement, but they also precipitated a pushback from local school administrators as being too prescriptive. These administrators complained that the advisory councils created special interest groups within the community, were not representative of all parents, and created alternative local political bases outside the control of the school board and school district. So in 1981, Congress and the Reagan administration began to dramatically decrease the parental involvement requirements, reducing their involvement to a "consultative" role, permitting but not requiring TOPACs, and removing the district requirement to fund parental involvement activities.

Many of the TOPACs were inactive, and others were controlled by a small group of parent organizers and activists. Still others were not trained to organize to improve schools or to use data. In many cases, school districts resisted collaborating with parents and purposefully stymied parental efforts. Instead of building a parent community with a shared vision, parent factions began to develop around such areas as special education and gifted and talented programs, where various parent groups tried to protect their own programs and funding (Mizell, 1979).

Despite the mixed results, the Title I parent provisions were not a failure (Bryk, 1997). They did serve to involve more parents in the education of their children; provided training developed by and for parents; exercised

planning, evaluation, and programmatic authority; and educated a whole generation of poor parents in how to use the political system to pressure education and institutional change. There are many grandparents today who gained political capital as a result of the Title I provisions. After all, weren't these the same skills and clout that more affluent parents exercised for their children? The only difference was that an outside entity, the federal government, intervened and influenced how the school district would interact and negotiate with poor parents. What the schools failed to understand was that the TOPACs were designed to serve a political purpose in partnering with the school but not to become part of the school bureaucracy or be controlled by the district. This ultimately took on the terminology of the "professional parent" as characterized by the mandated parental involvement provisions in the special education laws, going back to the original law best known by its public law title: P.L. 94-142.

We Have the Data: So Now What?

The experiment whereby the federal government was a partner with poor parents to provide a mechanism for collaboration and empowerment came to an end with the 1982 deregulation of Title I, which became "Chapter I" for the duration of the 1982 reauthorization. Now, forty-two years after the passage of ESEA, federal policies of parental involvement and community participation continue to be more rhetorical than meaningful; more theoretical than practical; an afterthought rather than a forethought; and they take a back seat to the more bureaucratic and technical elements of public education change and reform, especially testing and assessment. Every successive version of ESEA until 1982 increased parents' participation. Since then, there has been confusion in Congress about the appropriate federal role in engaging the public. School boards have frequently criticized provisions that were too prescriptive; cautious school administrators have charged that community engagement would lead to special interest control; there has been scant research providing information about effective parental and community advocacy policy; political bodies have been concerned about federal control of education; and there has been a lack of adequate monitoring and oversight of existing provisions by the federal education agencies. With the decrease in meaningful decisionmaking opportunities for parents came an increase in market-based measures, such as private school vouchers, transfer of students from low-performing public schools to higher-performing schools, and the option of choosing an unregulated and unaccountable service provider to provide before- and afterschool tutoring for students who do not pass the state tests.

What *has* increased since the passage of the 1994 reauthorization of ESEA Title I, known as the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) and the predecessor of NCLB, is the appetite for data, primarily data collected from state

assessments based on the standards required by the 1994 act and NCLB, but also from a myriad of other school district sources, from IQ tests to achievement assessments. The resulting discussions of this data often revolve around the quality of the tests, the validity and the reliability of the tests, and the utilization of data, but rarely revolve around the strategic questions that Senator Kennedy raised about how to increase and empower parents and communities to use data to change systems and institutions.

It is not that public engagement policies and provisions have been opposed in Congress, although it is usually a fight to convince Congress to include provisions every time there is a reauthorization. But there is resistance to envisioning parents, especially poor parents, and the community as equal partners in policy development and school decisionmaking processes and an inability to imagine a nationwide system in which educators, parents, and communities work collaboratively to improve schools and to guarantee equity based on valid and reliable academic achievement information. Both Congress and the Bush administration play a balancing act with parental provisions: On the one hand, they guard against repeating the TOPAC experiment, while on the other, they pay lip service to parents by drafting unenforceable provisions or passing choice programs that allow parents to remove their children from the public system. These solutions show a lack of learning from the early lessons.

The issues Kennedy raised with his amendments — the balance between data and parental involvement — continue to stir debate about the generation and use of academic information and the responsibility and role of parents and the community in using that information. With No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the immense expansion of testing and the testing industry has far outweighed considerations of how parents use and understand the information they receive. Education policy leader Tom Toch observes that "the scale of the NCLB testing requirements, competitive pressures in the testing industry, a shortage of testing experts, insufficient state resources, tight regulatory deadlines, and a lack of meaningful oversight of the sprawling NCLB testing enterprise are undermining NCLB's pursuit of higher academic standards" (Toch, 2006, p. 5). The linchpin of NCLB will be the nation, state, community, and parents acting on the information they receive about school performance; the irony is that the primary focus of schools has been on passing the tests and complying with the hundreds of pages of law and guidance, rather than on parents and communities working with schools to improve achievement. And while there was some strengthening of parental involvement in NCLB, the emphasis has been on choice rather than political organizing and mobilization. Privatization has become the proxy for civic responsibility, and while choice may improve the education of a few children, it drains the responsibility that parents and communities have in working together to improve their public schools. The scales have tipped so far in the direction of providing testing results and penalizing schools that it has taken

attention away from the issues of building public ownership of public schools (Matthews, 2006) and the task of working together as a community to ensure quality schools for all children.

By listening to the current dialogues and debates about NCLB, anyone would think that the critical issues of equity and excellence for poor and disadvantaged children have been reduced to high-stakes testing, teacher qualifications, annual yearly progress, and permitting parents to transfer their children out of low-performing schools. The hundreds of pages of law and guidance — the technical aspects of NCLB — have virtually subsumed the sections of NCLB that require low-income school districts to develop, with the participation of parents, parental involvement policies that give parents certain rights under these provisions. As for community participation, NCLB includes few provisions for communities to play any role in holding their schools and themselves accountable for quality public education for all children or for becoming educated consumers.

Reauthorizing NCLB: What We Have Learned about Building the Civic Base

President Lyndon Johnson and Senator Robert Kennedy were both right. The federal government must be, can be, and has been a partner in ensuring equal opportunity for all children, and the resources provided by ESEA over the years have demonstrated governmental influence and impact. Johnson's hopes that ESEA would have, by 2007, effectively addressed issues of equal educational opportunity for poor children far outpaced reality. While ESEA certainly fixed national attention on pressing issues of education quality, it was never the antipoverty measure that Johnson expected: A 1977 study showed that more than two-thirds of ESEA funds were not spent on students in poverty (Graham, 1984, pp. 203–216; Matusow, 1985, pp. 223–226). The federal government must work to ensure that civic participation and parental involvement are the engines that drive change and improvement. Unfortunately, it has almost entirely relinquished its role in helping low-income communities build the political capital necessary to push for systemic change. Kennedy would not be happy about that, nor could he have anticipated that bringing about change for poor children would have been so difficult or taken so long.

But with NCLB's reauthorization looming on the horizon, there is opportunity to make some changes. As Congress prepares to reauthorize NCLB, which expires in 2008, there are many lessons to be learned about parental and public engagement from the past forty-two years. The most critical public education challenge in the country — one that has severe consequences for democracy, the economy, the political system, social welfare, and security — is to meet head on the challenges of providing an equal educational opportunity for all children and doing so in integrated schools. If there is any one overarching criticism of NCLB, it is that it does not rise to the level of the prob-

lems it claims to resolve. In order to confront and change the norms and the policies that sustain inequality in our schools, the technical aspects of reform alone will be insufficient. We can get the education pedagogy right but still not achieve goals of equity and proficiency if we do not build a powerful civic base. Indeed, introducing innovations and changes in teaching and learning will not be sufficient independent of renewing the contract between our schools and the public. We must commit ourselves to involving and mobilizing the public, as prerequisite to educational reform, rather than subsidiary to it.

Beyond Parental Involvement: Lessons Learned about Building the Public Will for Creating Quality Public Schools

There are some lessons we have learned from the various iterations of ESEA about balancing parental and community involvement and utilizing performance data with other instructional imperatives that constitute a rich and meaningful education program for children in poverty. The key role that parents and the public play is one of accountability, holding not only the public schools accountable for performance but also themselves accountable for the civic roles they must play in ensuring a quality education for children. This is not just a matter of test scores, but of building community and civic ownership. This should not be a threat to public schools, but rather an understanding that issues of achievement, race, disability, language, and poverty are so difficult and entrenched that schools cannot and should not be required to tackle them alone (Hartman, 2006).

There are several assumptions that should undergird the next ESEA reauthorization:

- Federal policy can and does make a difference in the execution of quality public education, and policy, applied to ESEA *with enforcement*, can play an instrumental role in strengthening the current NCLB parental involvement provisions. There are still too many schools that shut parents and the community out of meaningful decisionmaking and participation.
- Public schools that are responsive to the needs of parents and families, as well as their students, can play a significant role in raising achievement levels.
- Parental involvement, alone, is inadequate to improve the most difficult public schools. Community members must also be involved in and responsible for providing resources and funding, support services, parental assistance, political pressure, and accountability.
- Quality and valid data play a critical part in empowering parents and the community in pressuring for improvement and change.
- The reauthorization of NCLB must guarantee a role for community members, service agencies, local education funds, and intermediary organizations in coordinating their efforts with the schools.

- Adequate resources are essential in building a strong educational infrastructure for students in poverty, including funds that build the capacity for federal, state, and local education agencies to incorporate parental and community involvement as an integral and equal part of the civic role of the school, as well as the instructional role.
- Incentives and funding should also be appropriated to provide the resources necessary for community-based organizations to partner with public schools, not only for Title I schools that are failing, but also for schools that are meeting the NCLB targets to ensure that they do not fall into failing status.

The first step in rebalancing parental and community involvement is to change and reduce the enormous role that testing currently plays in NCLB. There is an argument to be made for linking achievement to some measurement technique, especially when considering the complexity of our education system and the need for academic performance data. It is crucial to have some way to identify schools and students that are not doing well, and to ensure that those students are not lost on the public radar screen of caring and intervention. NCLB purports to do this, and it is an important goal of the act.

But the technical nature of large-scale assessments attached to high stakes that are often punitive and mean-spirited can restrict the public's understanding, vision, and meaning of the larger value of public education. In polls taken by the Public Education Network in partnership with *Education Week,* the public says that while they see schools as providing a *service*, they also see them as the center of their community and place greater emphasis on the *value* of public education as a critical function of democracy (Public Education Network, 2004). They understand that building community relationships and trust are pathways to assuring that educational reform is successful. Change that is imposed from the top and that short-circuits relationships that have already been established in the community is destined for failure, no matter how tempting the reform looks on paper.

The general dominance of modern technology that U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer alludes to — such as growth in the testing industry, increase in the state education bureaucratic apparatus, and assessment jargon that parents and the community cannot understand — is overwhelming the democratic process, which has clear implications for the NCLB theory that if data is provided to the public, they will be able to use that data to make improvements. Instead of public discourse that encourages community discussion about what a quality public education ought to be — its purposes, goals, visions, collaborations, strategies, student voices, equitable resources, and rewards for thinking outside of the box — this kind of discourse is often squeezed out by jargon-filled, bureaucratic discussions about the psychometrics and the technology of public education. While NCLB has, importantly,

focused more discussion on instructional improvement, test scores have also often become the defining element of *service* and what constitutes a good public education. Discussions have not focused on the shared values of parents and the community, or what kind of life skills our children will need for a world that has a short supply of creativity and commitment to issues such as equity, integration, adequate funding, and democratic involvement. The meaning of public education has been reduced to test scores and ensuring that the schools make annual yearly progress. When the psychometrics of public education takes center stage, authentic discussions about the values of democracy and public education take back stage. The first order of business in NCLB should be that the balance between technocracy and democracy, between compliance and partnership, between the public and the enterprise of public education needs to be restored.

Nevertheless, providing data is essential to a civic framework of accountability. Reflecting on the early discussions of ESEA, it is clear that while Kennedy would have supported the development of a data system, data and information for him were not an end but a means and a tool by which parents could pressure for change. In this regard, NCLB is out of kilter. Even when information is reported, it is often reported without explanation or interpretation. Students do not understand the purpose of the assessments they are being asked to take, nor do their parents. Under NCLB, parents and communities often perceive data used as a weapon that labels low-income schools without providing the resources or the capacity to make them better. Under the current framework, the unintended consequences of NCLB and the data system are actually exacerbating rather than reducing inequities (Public Education Network, 2006, pp. 2–4).

As in ESEA, NCLB should contain a requirement that schools involve parents as partners with the school district in decisionmaking. This mandate should be enforceable and contain a formal complaint process. This is the "recourse" that Senator Kennedy said poor parents must have in the event that a school district does not incorporate parental involvement as a key element of its organization (McLaughlin, 1975, p. 1). We learned that when the law does not require parental involvement, school districts often shut parents out from decisionmaking or pay lip service to parental involvement, rather than providing the mechanisms for meaningful involvement. This requirement should not pit parents against the school, but on the other hand, change often comes from the interplay of meaningful and constructive tensions. We learned from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the special education law that was originally passed in 1975, that federal policy can play a role in rearranging the relationships between parents and the school district. In special education, this was done by giving parents legal recourse if schools failed to provide a "free and appropriate public education" (or FAPE).

We learned from the TOPACs, however, that all parents should organize around a shared vision, rather than around the special interests of programs such as Title I, English as a Second Language (ESL), gifted and talented, special education, Head Start, and migrant programs. While all of these programs are important, federal programs should be careful not to unite parents around funding streams or bureaucratic agencies, thereby encouraging competition between parental interests, rather than building parental involvement around the larger visions that all parents, in working together, might agree are essential to a quality public education.

While it is important to employ safeguards to ensure that individual students are provided a quality public education, it is equally important that all parents work collectively for the common interest of all students. Robert Kennedy was correct when he sensed that change would occur only through political pressure of parents. The more "educentric" technical fixes we use to address interpersonal and political issues, the more we distance the public from taking on its share of responsibility for educational quality. While TOPACs were designed as a mechanism to increase the involvement of poor parents, the advisory councils themselves often looked like special interest groups that served to exclude other parents and parent organizations from decisionmaking.

Research also bears out that unless involvement becomes a district and school priority, it will frequently be a stepchild to the rest of the school program. In the past, parental involvement was an appendage, not an integral part of the school instructional program. TOPACs often were not effective because Title I officials did not want to be bothered by an effective council, and many school officials did not value parents as important partners to the school programs (Mizell, 1979).

School districts did not lose funding if they did not implement involvement, superintendents and principals did not lose their jobs if they barred parents from participation, and the federal and state departments of education infrequently monitored school district implementation in this area. Government, reformers, schools of education, and schools themselves focus so much on the pedagogy of reform that they spend little if any time on the civic element of instructional change. The civic dimension must be incorporated as a seamless strategy for achieving the instructional goals, and while Kennedy sensed that this was important, Sections 205 and 208 of ESEA were not muscular or explicit enough to provide the incentives or the mandates to develop and enforce this policy. Why is this dimension important? It's important because the extent to which the civic engagement gap is not closed is the extent to which we will be unable to close the achievement gap.

To accomplish this, school districts must reorganize to be more responsive to the civic needs of instruction. At the same time, federal and state education agencies need to be responsible for providing the necessary resources, models of practice, administrator and teacher professional development, and

incentives for districts and schools to experiment and change. The current structure of schools was not designed to welcome parents and the community into a framework of discourse and decisionmaking, but to crank out student learners based on a model of efficiency rather than effectiveness.

Clarence Stone, professor emeritus at the University of Maryland, reminds us of the work yet to be done when he says: "Building public engagement is not a technical matter devoid of interpersonal dynamics, nor is it a matter unconnected to structures of community influence" (Stone, 2006, p. 4). Those who develop the change and reforms cannot work in isolation of the people who have to "own" the reform and implement the reform. Whether it is NCLB, or any other major reform paradigm, both those at the top who create the reform and those at the local level who must own the reform must understand that they need each other and that they can't work apart from each other. The new NCLB must build in provisions that help schools develop the capacity to involve parents and the community. In so doing, our hope is that the Rubys of our country will not have to wait another forty-two years to gain what should be — but is not — a guaranteed civil right in the U.S. Constitution: a quality public education for all children regardless of zip code.

Notes

1. In this landmark church-state case, the U.S. Supreme Court, in a 5–4 decision, let stand a New Jersey statute that reimbursed parents, including those who went to Catholic parochial schools, for the cost of transportation to and from school. The Court reasoned that there was no First Amendment church-state breach because the parochial schools did not directly receive any state money. For many years, *Everson* set the standard by which the religious clauses of the First Amendment were to be interpreted (*Everson v. Board of Education*, 1948).
2. Kennedy and Keppel's exchange actually joined a debate that surrounds the current NCLB act. Keppel believed that the home circumstances and poverty were instrumental causes of educational failure; Kennedy and civil rights groups believed that the public schools not meeting the needs of poor children was the major cause of failure.
3. Required parental and citizen participation in the planning, development, and oversight of federal programs was not new to federal policies passed as part of the War on Poverty agenda. Such programs as the Community Action Programs and Model Cities were prime example of programs in which poor and disadvantaged citizens had control over millions of federal dollars. Both programs, however, became victims of the Nixon administration, which changed course and retreated from insisting on real citizen participation, and from local politicians who objected to the "alternative" political bases that were established by the federal programs and ultimately brushed aside the neighborhood activists and used federal money to parcel out jobs and contracts. By the early 1970s, the concept of requiring citizen participation as federal policy was dead. Two federal education programs, however, survived and still require parent participation: Head Start and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The No Child Left Behind Act has parental requirements, but they are virtually unenforceable, and parents have had little recourse should a school district not implement the requirements. See Pradeep & Cooper (2005) and Eger & Marlowe (2006).

References

Boethel, M., Averett, A., Buttram, J., Donnelly, D., Jordan, C., Myers, M., et al. (2003). *Diversity: School, family and community connections, annual syntheses*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Breyer, S. (2005). *Active liberty: Interpreting our democratic constitution.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. (1954).

Bryk, A. (1997). *Democratic localism: A lever for institutional renewal.* Los Angeles: Westview Press.

Cibulka, J. G., & Kritek, W. J. (1996). *Coordination among schools, families, and communities.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Dallek, R. (1998). *Flawed giant: Lyndon Johnson and his times, 1961–1973.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Eger III, R. J., & Marlowe, J. (2006). A Dynamic Stages Model of the Urban Policy Process. *Review of Policy Research, 23,* 413–431.

Everson v. Board of Education of the Township of Ewing, 330 U.S. 1 (1947).

Graham, H. D. (1984). *The uncertain triumph: Federal education policy in the Kennedy and Johnson years.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Halperin, S. (1978, September 9). ESEA: Five Years Later. *Congressional Record,* pp. 8492–8494.

Hartman, C. (2006). *Poverty and race in America: The emerging agendas.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement.* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Johnson, L. B. (1971). *Public papers of the president of the United States, 1964–1970.* Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Matthews, D. (2006). *Reclaiming public education by reclaiming our democracy.* Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press.

Matusow, Allen J. (1985). *The unraveling of America: A history of liberalism in the 1960s.* Perennial: New York.

McLaughlin, M. (1975). *Evaluation and reform: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Title I* (A study commissioned by the United States Congress, conducted by the Rand Corporation). Cambridge, MA: Rand Corporation, Ballinger Publishing Company.

Mizell, H. (1979). *Maintaining parent interest in Title I parent advisory councils.* Educational Resources Information Center. Retrieved July 25, 2006, from http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?nfpb=true&_pageLabel=RecordDetail&

Pradeep, C. K., & Cooper, T. (2005). Democratizing the administrative state: Connecting neighborhood councils and city agendas. *Public Administration Review, 65,* 559–567.

Public Education Network. (2004). *Learn. Vote. Act: A national survey of public opinion on the public's responsibility for public education.* Washington, DC: Author.

Public Education Network. (2006). *Public affairs: The community's role in public education.* Washington, DC: Author.

Senate Subcommittee on Education, United States Congress, 89th Congress, 1st session. (1965). *Hearings on Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.*

Sirianni, C., & Friedland, L. A. (2005). *The civic renewal movement.* Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press.

Stone, C. (2006). Power, Reform, and Urban Regime Analysis. *City and Community, 5,* 23–38.

Stone, C., Henig, J., Jones, D. B., & Pierannunizi, C. (2001). *Building civic capacity: The politics of reforming urban schools.* Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

Toch, T. (2006). *Margins of error: The education testing industry in the No Child Left Behind era.* Washington, DC: Education Sector.

United States Congress, 89th Congress. (1965, April 11). *Public Law 89-10,* H.R. 2362, Sections 205 and 208.

Weiss, H. B., Kreider, H., Lopez, M. E., & Chatman, C. M. (Eds.). (2005). *Preparing educators to involve families: From theory to practice.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

An enormous debt of gratitude to the many community organizers, academics, researchers, school superintendents, principals, teachers, and political colleagues who have contributed to the thoughts and ideas that are reflected in this article. They have kept alive the passions of Robert F. Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson that, as a nation, we can provide an equal educational opportunity for every child and that the federal government will play a major role in that effort. I want to thank Rep. Jesse L. Jackson Jr. for his sponsorship of an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would guarantee a quality public education for every child as a national civil right, providing federal legal recourse for low-income children and families; Wendy Puriefoy for her vision of expanding the public and community space in which all of us as a nation talk at the local level about what kind of public education we value for our children; the many parents and local education leaders around the country who selflessly seek a quality public education for all children, not just their own; Milbrey McLaughlin for her friendship and groundbreaking Title I evaluative work; Sam Halperin for his abiding belief in the forgotten students in our country; and the local education funds for showcasing a model of community organizing and involvement that demonstrates that good things happen for low-income children when the public, government, business, and the philanthropic sectors collaborate and share visions. And I am especially indebted to Sarah Dryden-Peterson and Sara Schwartz Chrismer and their coeditors for expanding and stretching the thoughts in this article and providing this author insights about what they, as future education leaders and policymakers, consider to be the salient Title I issues of the future.

This article has been been reprinted with permission of the *Harvard Educational Review* (ISSN 0017-8055). You may copy and distribute this work among colleagues for educational purposes only. Posting on a public website or on a listserv is not allowed. Any other use, print or electronic, will require written permission from the Review. You may subscribe to *HER* at www.harvardeducationalreview.org. *HER* is published quarterly by the Harvard Education Publishing Group, 8 Story Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, tel. 617-495-3432. Copyright © 2006 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved.