What's
TRUST
Got to Do With It?

A Communications and Engagement Guide
for School Leaders Tackling the Problem of
Persistently Failing Schools

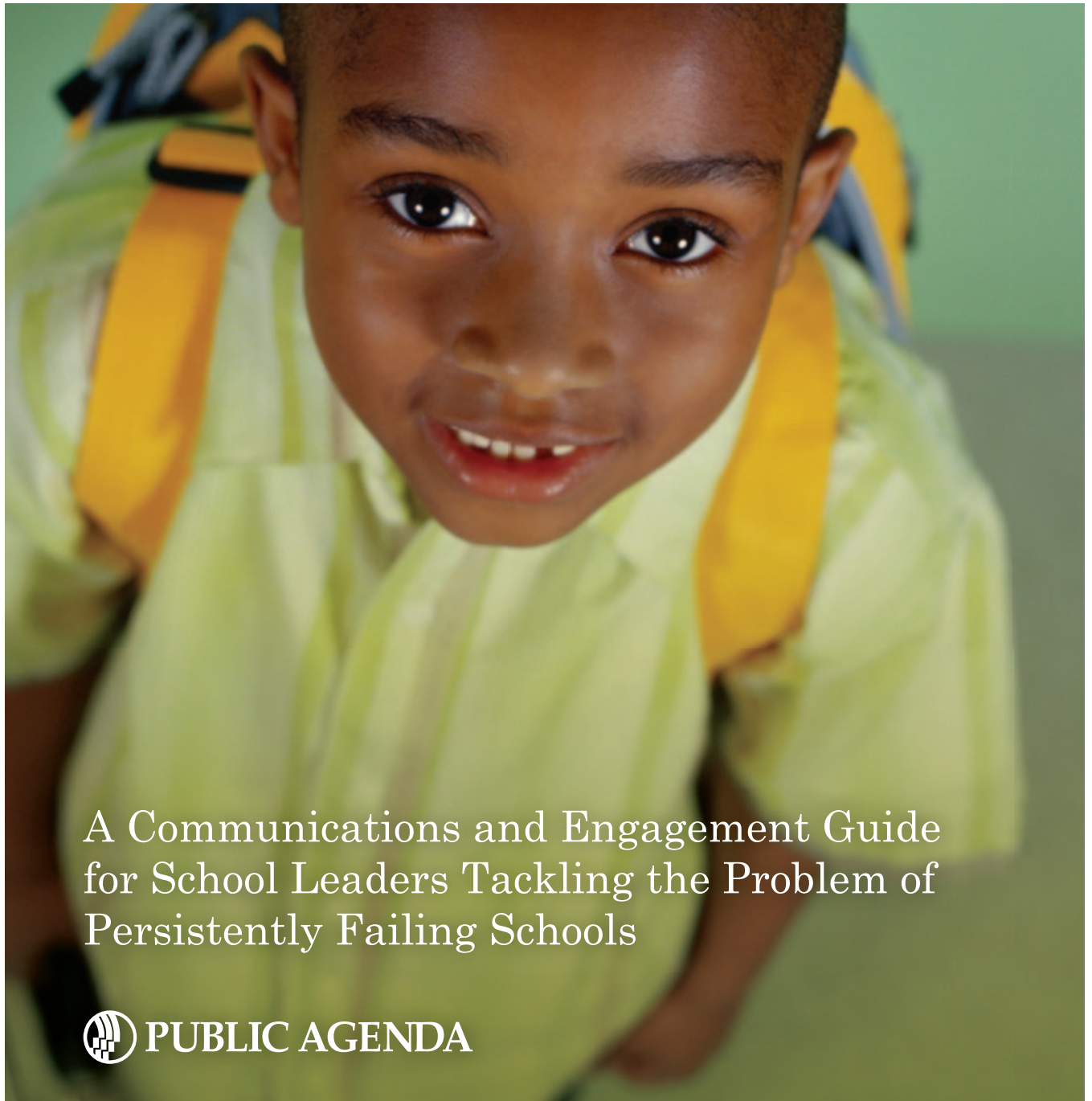# What's Trust Got to Do With It?

A Communications and Engagement Guide for School Leaders
Tackling the Problem of Persistently Failing Schools

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The rationale for taking bold action on the nation's persistently failing schools can be summed up in one dramatic and disturbing statistic: half of the young Americans who drop out of high school attend just 12 percent of the nation's schools.[1]

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan calls these schools "dropout factories," pointing out that some are so dysfunctional that "50, 60, 70 percent of students are dropping out."[2] Although the issue is often presented as a problem affecting the country's largest cities, an assessment by the Alliance for Excellent Education emphasizes that there are also some deeply inadequate schools in smaller cities, small towns, and rural areas. "Their one unifying characteristic," says the Alliance, "is that they disproportionately serve our nation's poor and minority students."[3]

Ending the cycle of failure at these schools is a daunting challenge and a surprisingly controversial one. There is an intense expert debate on which kinds of reform are most likely to be successful and an uneven track record for even the most earnest attempts at school turnarounds.[4] Communities and situations differ, and few experts would argue that one kind of solution fits all. The dilemma is even more acute because the boldest reforms—such as closing failing schools and offering better traditional public school or charter options, replacing school leadership and staff, or breaking large, unmanageable schools into smaller units—often provoke angry, prolonged public opposition.

In many instances, school leaders seem trapped between two undesirable options. They can back away from serious reform to mollify protesting parents, students, teachers, and community residents. That often means students continue attending deeply dysfunctional schools that rob them of their future. Or, leaders can push changes through despite broad opposition. The risk here is that reforms may not be sustained because they are not accepted or well-understood. Even with strong support from governors, mayors, and other key leaders, forging ahead in the face of widespread resistance can damage trust and cohesion and leave superintendents and principals working with alienated, suspicious parents, teachers, and students. That makes a tough challenge even more difficult, and in most cases, it's not the best starting point for long-term success.

What's Trust Got to Do With It? is an effort to help school leaders and reformers find a third path. Our goal is to aid leaders in understanding and anticipating negative community reactions to bold school turnaround proposals. With a more complete, nuanced appreciation of "where communities are coming from"—and by applying well-tested communications and engagement strategies—leaders may be able to avoid the most pernicious and negative forms of public opposition. In this case, forewarned is forearmed.

[1] Alliance for Excellent Education, *Issue Brief: Prioritizing the Nation's Low-Performing High Schools*, April, 2010, Page 1, http://www.all4ed.org/files/PrioritizingLowestPerformingSchools.pdf.
[2] Ibid, Page 6.
[3] Ibid, Page 1.
[4] For example, see: David Stuit for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, *Are Bad Schools Immortal? The Scarcity of Turnarounds and Shutdowns in Both Charter and District Sectors*, December 2010, www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/20101214_AreBadSchoolImmortal/Fordham_Immortal.pdf.

It is our hope is that the information here can help leaders propelling change take a more positive, active approach. With more effective public and parent engagement before decisions are made, we believe it is possible for leaders to forge more productive community relationships—the kinds of relationships that strengthen school turnarounds and support student learning.

This report was prepared by Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan public opinion research and engagement organization that has focused on K-12 public education issues for more than two decades. The report draws on three strands of information:

◗ **An assessment of parents' views on school turnarounds.** The following pages offer a summary of how parents, especially parents in districts with poorly performing schools, see the school turnaround issue and specifically how they view the idea of closing existing schools and offering more effective alternatives. Public Agenda reviewed existing survey research on public and parent views, conducted focus groups, and completed a series of one-on-one interviews with leaders of community and parent groups with experience in school closings and school turnaround controversies.

◗ **Public Agenda's reservoir of opinion research and engagement work.** Over the years, Public Agenda has conducted dozens of surveys of parents, students, teachers, and school administrators on a wide range of education issues. We have also worked with scores of communities nationwide to organize more productive conversations on school reform and related issues. This report reflects our advice and insights based on our accumulated experience in the field.[5]

◗ **Advice from communications and engagement experts.** As part of this project, Public Agenda interviewed a wide range of experts and opinion leaders with experience in school turnarounds and convened a strategy session in Washington, D.C., in May 2011, bringing together seasoned communication and engagement professionals to seek their advice on how leaders could handle these difficult situations better.

A complete summary of the background research can be found on page 35. This work was funded by the Eli & Edythe Broad Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, and The Skillman Foundation.

I. Why Community Response Is So Often Negative

Good communications and effective public engagement start with an accurate understanding of the values, beliefs, assumptions, experiences, and knowledge people bring to an issue. In this section, we focus mainly on the views of parents whose children currently attend or are likely to attend underperforming schools. Our assessment is based on qualitative opinion research conducted specifically for this report, along with a review of existing survey and focus group research conducted by Public Agenda and others. Based on our appraisal, there are five important themes that school leaders and reformers need to understand and pay attention to.

Theme No. 1: Most parents with children in low-performing schools and districts do want change.

Public Agenda's research among low-income and minority parents over the last decade shows indisputably that nearly all recognize the importance of education in their children's lives and that they are typically less satisfied with local schools than parents overall. African-American and Hispanic parents, for example, are substantially more likely than white parents to say that there are "very serious" problems in local schools when it comes to dropout rates, low standards, and insufficient attention to reading, writing, math, and science (see Table 1, on page 5).[6]

What's more, minority parents, especially African-American parents, are more likely to believe that local school leaders are not effectively addressing the needs of low-income and minority children. Forty-three percent of black parents and 26 percent of Hispanic parents give local school superintendents fair or poor marks for "working hard to make sure that low-income and minority children do as well in school as youngsters from more affluent families."[7] Minority parents are also more likely than white parents to give superintendents fair or poor marks for ensuring that the district has high standards and that students get the support they need to reach them (see Table 2, on page 6).[8]

6 Jean Johnson, Ana Maria Arumi, and Amber Ott, *Reality Check 2006, Issue No. 2: How Black and Hispanic Families Rate Their Schools,* Public Agenda, 2006, Page 13, http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/rc0602.pdf.
7 Ibid, Page 15.
8 Ibid.

Minority parents more concerned about low standards and high dropout rates

Percent saying problem is "very serious" in local schools	African-American Parents	Hispanic/Latino Parents	White Non-Hispanic Parents
Too many students drop out	38	48	18
Too many students get passed through the system without learning	38	38	24
There's not enough emphasis on basics like reading, writing, and math	25	36	14
Kids are not taught enough math and science	24	17	8
Academic standards are too low	29	21	11

In focus groups conducted in 2011 with parents in Denver, Detroit, Washington, D.C., and Chicago, most volunteered their concerns about local schools before the moderator even broached the subject of low-performing schools. The parents' complaints centered on teacher quality, low academic standards, school climate, and a general anxiety that the school district was not genuinely committed to helping their children succeed. One Washington, D.C., mother believed that the district was "not backing our students up… They're really not interested in our students." Another D.C. mother said that her child's teachers "are just not engaging with the students… They're just there. You wonder why you go into a profession to teach."

In Denver, the mother of a 10-year-old complained about the disorder and lack of structure at her child's school: "I'm pretty much [there] all the time… [As for] how the school has been run for the last year, it's unorganized." A Detroit father was not at all reassured just because his child was getting good grades: "I can't be happy that my daughter is on the honor roll knowing that those teachers in her school might be [failing her]."

Another Detroit parent had already given up on the public schools for her children:

> *"When it was time to put my kids in school, the public school down the street [had] a police car there for the second graders…that was a great deterrent for me, so I found the nearest charter school."*

The bottom line is that there is an enormous appetite for reform among low-income, minority parents and broad dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Minority parents tougher on superintendents about high standards for all students

Percent giving local superintendents "fair" or "poor" marks for:	African-American Parents	Hispanic/Latino Parents	White Non-Hispanic Parents
Ensuring that the district has high standards and giving students the support to reach them	39	24	17
Working hard to make sure that low-income and minority children do as well in school as youngsters from more affluent families	43	26	20

Theme No. 2: Many low-income parents also voice a genuine loyalty to local public schools despite their dissatisfaction with them.

For these parents, closing a school is seen as a blow and a loss to the community. Many simply cannot understand why local leaders don't "fix the school we have" instead of closing it.

For most parents, and for most Americans generally, the idea of closing a school in order to improve children's education simply doesn't make sense. This finding emerges in qualitative research conducted specifically for this project and in opinion surveys conducted on a national basis.

In the Public Agenda focus groups, low-income parents almost unanimously rejected suggestions that some schools are so dysfunctional and discouraging to students and teachers that it would be better to close them down and start over. It is important to underscore that the focus group moderator did not mention the idea of closing a

particular local school known to the parents. The parents' response was to the idea in general (see Section II for more), and there's evidence that much of the general public also pushes back strongly against the idea of closing schools.

When the 2010 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll asked Americans nationwide to rate their local public schools, only a third (34 percent) gave them a rating of "A" or "B." Yet in the same survey, most respondents resisted the idea of closing schools as a step toward improvement. When the poll asked Americans what should be done with a "persistently low-performing school in your community," most people supported the most conventional, modest approach (see Table 3). More than half of the public (54 percent) said the best solution was to "keep the school open with existing teachers and principals and provide comprehensive outside support"; 17 percent wanted to "close the school and reopen with a new principal"; 13 percent wanted to "close the school and reopen as a public charter

Parent support is with retooling existing schools

Let's say there is a consistently poor-performing school in your community. What do you believe would be the best solution?	Percent
Keep the school open with existing teachers and principal and provide comprehensive outside support	54
Close the school and reopen with a new principal	17
Close the school and reopen as a public charter school	13
Close the school and send the students to other higher performing nearby schools	11
Don't know	5

Source: PDK/Gallup General Public Survey, 2010

school"; and 11 percent opted for closing the school and sending students to "other higher performing nearby schools."[9]

We are not citing these survey findings to suggest that deeply dysfunctional schools that harm kids should never be closed or that reformers should back away from taking strong action. Leaders with integrity have a responsibility to make decisions based on the welfare of the students—not survey results. What's more, schools sometimes have to be closed for reasons of safety, budget, and population changes, in addition to persistently poor performance. Nevertheless, these findings do suggest how counterintuitive the idea of closing schools and replacing principals and teachers is to many people. It may make sense from a systemic or management perspective, but typical citizens generally see school closings as a defeat and a loss.

In the communities where we conducted focus groups, most low-income parents saw local

public schools as important symbols of the community, even though they criticized them for not fulfilling their educational mission. Most of the parents placed enormous value on having a traditional public school in their neighborhood and saw it as an important community institution. Many had strong feelings of loyalty, affection, and nostalgia for local public schools.

Of the parents we interviewed, many believed that closing a local school meant that their community was being "written off" or abandoned, even when well-planned charters would be developed to take the original school's place. As we discuss later, many of these parents had good things to say about charter schools, but most also wanted strong traditional public schools in their own community. Even though charter schools are public institutions, nearly every parent we interviewed drew a sharp distinction between "public schools" and "charter schools" (see Section II for more discussion on attitudes about charters).

9   Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, *Highlights of the 2010 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll*, September, 2010, Page 11, http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/docs/2010_Poll_Report.pdf.

In Detroit, one mother said this:

> *"Detroit public schools represent our history, our legacy. Detroit public schools are a part of Detroit. If Detroit public schools fail, Detroit fails. They look bad— we look bad… We want to succeed."*

A parent advocate we spoke to in Seattle pointed out that "people, no matter what their school is doing, love their school, because schools are such a neighborhood thing. People sort of use them as a touchstone."

The experts convened by the project for the communications and engagement strategy session also talked about how jarring and disruptive changes such as closing schools and replacing familiar principals and teachers can be to communities. One expert cautioned: "When you make a determination to close a school, you're affecting a neighborhood. You're creating a big gap."

Moreover, these feelings of loss and resentment can be intensified when reform plans hit snags or don't succeed as originally described or envisioned. One expert talked about the anger that can be generated when reformers "shake things up" and then leave the district or community to take on new positions and challenges elsewhere:

> *Many of the parents believed that closing a local school meant that their community was being "written off" or abandoned, even when well-planned charters would be developed to take the original's place.*

"When [reformers'] plans don't work, [they're] able to walk away…but a lot of the people who live in those communities don't have choices of other places to go… Schools are often a community anchor."

A New York community advocate who has been involved in school closings believed that the strategy needs to be re-assessed:

"Unless someone can prove to me that [closing schools] has worked somewhere in the country to improve outcomes overall, not just for the kids who were once educated in that building, I'd say it's extremely disruptive and extremely damaging."

For many low-income parents—and for the broader public as well—the attachment to the ideal of a local public school is a strong one. This attachment is not easily severed, nor is it easily replaced. For leaders who want to improve communications and engagement on school turnarounds, understanding this deep emotional connection and honoring it is essential—even in the instances when it cannot be fully accommodated.

Theme No. 3: Many parents do not realize how brutally inadequate local schools are.

Parents rarely know the facts that make the school turnaround issue so urgent. People's emotional attachment to local schools is a crucial element driving opposition to school closings and other kinds of fundamental change, but a lack of information and context also plays an important role. Although most low-income parents value education and want their children to attend better schools, many simply aren't aware of how dysfunctional and ineffective some of these low-performing schools really are or how seriously their children are being set back. Many have been repeatedly reassured by local educators that their schools are on the right track. Consequently, the message from reformers that a local school is so deficient that it might be better to close it can seem to come "out of the blue."

To promote better dialogue and engagement, it's crucial that leaders understand that most parents and other community residents simply don't know what they know. National surveys show that low-income, less-educated

Low-income, less well-educated parents less informed about their children's schools and coursework

Percentage of parents who said they know "a lot" about academic rankings and milestones	Low Income (≤$35k)	High Income ($75k+)	HS or Less	College+
How much would you say you know about how your child's school ranks academically compared to others?	44%	65%	40%	64%
How much would you say you know aobut the specific academic milestones that your child should have met this year?	49%	68%	49%	73%

parents are much less likely to know what their children should be learning and whether local schools really measure up (see Table 4).

◗ Less than half of parents with a high school degree or less say they know "a lot" about "the specific academic milestones [their] child should have met this year." That's compared to more than 7 in 10 parents with a college degree or better.[10]

◗ Only 44 percent of low-income parents say they know a lot about how their child's school ranks academically compared to others in the area; 65 percent of higher-income parents say they know lot about this.[11]

◗ Lower income parents are also less likely to be attuned to debate over whether U.S. schools are teaching to world-class standards. Only 4 in 10 low-income parents say they think the country is falling behind other countries in terms of education. Meanwhile, 6 in 10 higher-income parents worry about this (see Table 5).

The gap between what leaders see and weigh in making school turnaround decisions and what the general public sees and understands can be pronounced. A few years ago, the Kettering Foundation, based in Dayton, Ohio, sponsored a series of community forums focused on the achievement gap. The sessions opened with a discussion of the disparities in standardized test scores among minority and white students. In its summary report, the Kettering Foundation notes:[12]

> *"First, the words 'achievement gap' hold almost no meaning for the people with the most at stake: the students, parents, and other residents of communities where the achievement gap is most pronounced. At the start of the forums, many participants didn't even know what those words meant, much less what could or should be done about the problem."*

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[10] From forthcoming Public Agenda survey of parents on parental involvement for Communicating for Social Change and the GE Foundation. Full results will be available in winter 2011–2012 at www.publicagenda.org.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Kettering Foundation, *Helping Students Succeed: Communities Confront the Achievement Gap*, 2010, Page 1, www.kettering.org/media_room/ publications/Helping-Students-Succeed.

TABLE 5:

Lower-income parents less attuned to the debate over world-class standards	Low Income (≤$35k)	High Income ($75k+)
In general, when it comes to education, do you think the United States is getting ahead of the rest of the world, just keeping up, or is it falling behind the rest of the world?		
Getting ahead	23%	4%
Just keeping up	32%	33%
Falling behind	41%	61%
Don't know	4%	2%

It is important to note that even though parents often lack key pieces of information, they are typically very interested in what is happening in local schools. In the focus groups for this project, many of the parents displayed a very good grasp of the details about local school politics and recent controversies in the district. Many had clearly been paying attention to education issues. But many also lacked the specific information that gives the school turnaround issue such urgency for leadership. Most parents also lacked information about solutions that have shown promise in low-income communities with troubled schools. In many cases, parents may not realize how serious the problem is because they have so little personal experience with more effective, successful schools.

Theme No. 4: For most parents, academic problems in local schools are intensified by broader social problems.

Many are doubtful whether solutions that focus solely on the school and academics can really help these schools turn the corner.

Nearly half of parents across the country (49 percent) believe that problems in local high schools stem mainly from "social problems and kids who misbehave" compared to 35 percent who say the main problem is "low academic standards and outdated curricula."[13] When the 2010 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup survey asked parents which is more important in helping children learn—the school or the parents—it wasn't even close: 76 percent of parents say parents; only 21 percent say the schools.[14]

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[13] From forthcoming Public Agenda/GE survey of parents on parental involvement.

[14] Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, *Highlights of the 2010 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll*, September, 2010, Page 11, http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/docs/2010_Poll_Report.pdf.

Other surveys repeatedly show broad parental and public concern about incivility and a rough-edged school climate that undercuts learning. More than 7 in 10 parents (and 8 in 10 teachers) say that parents' failure to teach their children discipline is a major problem for the schools.[15] Seven in 10 say that "students treating teachers with a lack of respect" is a serious or very serious problem.[16] Majorities also point to problems such as drugs, fighting, and bullying; half say that cheating is a major issue.

In the focus groups for this project, there was a prevailing sense that local schools face a broad array of non-academic problems ranging from lack of parental involvement, lack of respect for teachers, lack of cooperation from students, and concerns that "money is not getting to the classroom." A few parents pointed out that some students are difficult for any teacher to handle because of the prevalence of drugs, gangs, pop culture, and/or apathetic or indulgent parenting.

One Detroit father told us:

> *"I think there is an education problem in America, because a lot of young people—they don't have enough role models…[and] education is on the back burner."*

Another parent said:

> *"I'm thinking these kids [at my children's school] are so disrespectful. I mean—it's ridiculous. I'd be there with my kids,*

> *and I find myself snatching kids up [to discipline them]. I'm forgetting they aren't mine."*

Public Agenda's survey research with students and teachers in low-income and mainly minority schools show that many of them share these very same concerns.[17]

Many of the parents also believed that schools in general don't get enough financial support, while others worried that whatever money there is for schools is not getting to their neighborhoods or to the classroom where it can help teachers and students. For these parents, it often wasn't clear how closing a school, replacing a principal and staff, or breaking up a larger school would help given the circumstances.

Theme No. 5: Many parents are deeply suspicious of information from "downtown" or the central district office.

Most of the parents interviewed for this project lived in communities that struggle economically, and many believed that their interests are generally ignored by decision makers and/or that decision makers are routinely dishonest or corrupt. Many were cynical and frustrated, and some were quite vocal in their anger and lack of trust.

In Detroit, after learning that the focus group moderator was from New York, one mother raged about decision makers in her city:

> *"Can I ask—in [New York City], do people*

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[15] Public Agenda, *Teaching Interrupted: Do Discipline Policies in Today's Public Schools Foster the Common Good?* 2004, Page 3, www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/teaching_interrupted.pdf.

[16] Public Agenda, *Nearly Three In Four Americans Say Bullying Is A Serious Problem In Their Local Schools*, April 2010, www.publicagenda.org/pages/bullying-2010.

[17] See also: *Reality Check: How Black and Hispanic Families Rate Their Schools*, May 2006, and *Teaching Interrupted: Do Discipline Policies in Today's Public Schools Foster the Common Good?*, May 2004. All reports are available at www.publicagenda.org.

come into the office and then just pillage and rape and…take everything that is not nailed down? Because in Detroit, as far as the mayor, the police department… whatever they can take, whatever false charity they can set up, whatever they can do to suck all the money out of it..."

In Washington, D.C., one father bitterly questioned whether the people managing and working in the public schools really cared about the kids at all: "The purpose of DCPS is not necessarily to educate kids. It is to provide employment. It is an employer first and last." And in Denver, we heard this: "[District leaders] pretend to listen. They say what you want to hear."

Disenchantment with "downtown" can lead parents to question any information they receive from officialdom. This lack of trust emerged strongly in both Washington, D.C., and Detroit. A D.C. mother's doubts about school leadership led her to question the district's teacher evaluation policies:

"I mean how do they deem [a teacher as bad]? That's what I'm trying to figure out. That part I never understood…how [Michelle Rhee] deemed [teachers] bad."

In Detroit, one father who had been active in the school debate there complained that he couldn't get reliable information:

"The education curriculum—which [myself and fellow parents] have been addressing with [the district] for the last couple of years—no one ever seems to be able to give us an answer on that; same with the budget. We asked to see it printed out."

The perception that decisions are made elsewhere—and without significant input from the community—was often seen as a problem in and of itself. One parent advocate said:

> "As a parent I feel like my voice is not being heard very much. All the decisions being made are being made…by the central office, by the superintendent… and they haven't been listening to parents enough."

This level of skepticism about leadership and estrangement from decision makers is not rare in the United States today. There is a broad lack of public trust in institutions and leadership in nearly every sector, and schools and those leading them are no exception. Moreover, public doubts about the ability of elected officials and district leaders to make good decisions for schools are hardly a recent phenomenon.

> *The perception that decisions are made elsewhere—and without significant input from the community—was often seen as a problem in and of itself.*

In the early 1990s, Public Agenda asked Americans nationwide which groups they trusted most to make decisions about public schools. Just 14 percent of the public put a lot of trust in "elected officials in Washington,

D.C." Fewer than 3 in 10 people put a lot of trust in local elected officials, governors, or teachers' union representatives. Strong majorities said that they trusted the judgments of parents and teachers most.[18] Yet over the past 10 to 15 years, it is elected officials, national and state policymakers, and union officials who have been most visible in shaping reforms in public education. In part, some of the public's reservations about school turnarounds may stem from their doubts about the agents of change—often leaders and experts coming from outside their communities, from "downtown," or from "the state house."

One expert interviewed in Detroit spoke about the difficulty of re-establishing and maintaining a sense of trust, even when school closings stem from almost unavoidable financial choices:

> "We'd love to have a neighborhood school in as many neighborhoods as possible, but it's just not feasible…I think there's a real good-faith effort to communicate that. The difficulty is [that] people are suspicious of the messenger."

There is another key theme emerging from the research, and it is a fundamentally important one. Public Agenda's focus groups in Washington, D.C. and Detroit show that race and economics play a significant role. Many of the low-income, minority parents voiced their concerns that those making the decisions did not share their background and experiences and didn't understand the local situation.

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[18] Public Agenda, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools*, December 1993.

Some believed that their communities were being targeted for school closures while middle-class, mainly white districts were spared. Some questioned whether the information being reported in local papers or provided by the school department was accurate, clearly suggesting that decision makers might be manipulating the data so that low-income, minority schools would be closed while schools in other neighborhoods remained open.

Leaders and reformers need to know that these doubts are common and accept the challenge of re-establishing trust. It is a prerequisite to opening a more productive dialogue about how to improve local schools.

II. What Happens When Parents Wrestle With Choices

The focus groups conducted for this project had two purposes. One was to provide additional insights about the attitudes among typical parents on the issue of school turnaround—the concerns, beliefs, experiences, and assumptions that parents typically "bring into the room". But the second purpose was to learn more about how parents respond when they receive vital information, look at different options for school turnaround, and begin wrestling with the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches.

As part of the focus group discussions, respondents were presented with a hypothetical school-closing controversy, loosely based on one in New York City. The focus group participants were given handouts outlining a school with these characteristics:

◗ It is a high school in New York City with over 700 students, 50 years old, located in a low-income area of the city.

◗ About 80 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

◗ It has double the number of children with limited English-language ability as typical schools.

◗ It has a graduation rate of 37 percent.

◗ At the end of 9th grade, only about 10 percent of the students read at grade level.

◗ Some students say the school is chaotic, with frequent fights and loitering in the halls, but others stick up for their teachers and praise the school.

◗ Some students point to teachers who have genuinely helped them, but others complain that in some classes, teachers just make students copy notes from the board and do busywork.

◗ The school has a "College Today" program that enables students to attend college prep courses and even take some classes at the local community college. Kids who participate say these classes are challenging and interesting.

◗ The principal has been at the school for the past three years, and he acknowledges that it has serious problems, but he says he is "working hard to turn it around."

◗ There has been a very small improvement in test scores, but they are still considerably lower than the district says they should be.

◗ The principal says he is very focused on safety and school climate, and he believes that if he can reduce the number of disruptions during the day, learning at the school will improve.

◗ The principal says that his biggest wish is for parents to get more involved in their kids' education—that will be the key to success.

Although this is barebones information, it is considerably more detailed and precise than the information many parents have about local schools. In talking about the hypothetical case, most of the parents thought it was realistic, and most accepted low student test scores and low graduation rates as strong indicators of problems in the school.

The respondents were then asked to consider competing options, loosely based on the turnaround options set forth by the U.S. Department of Education's "Race to the Top" program. The options were simplified to be understandable to non-experts, and the rationale behind each was described in user-friendly, down-to-earth terms. The options were read aloud, and each respondent received a handout with options written on it.

Here are the options presented to a focus group of parents in Washington, D.C.[19]

A. Break the school up into smaller units, so students can get more personal attention from teachers and administrators.

- The problem is that this school is just too big. One principal can't handle it all.

- It can be divided up into four smaller "academies."

- The same building will be used, and the teaching staff will remain the same, but kids will interact with a smaller group of classmates, and since each academy will have its own principal and administration, students will see and interact with more adults.

- The current principal will oversee the four academy principals and their respective schools.

B. Close the school and allow parents and students to choose from a number of better high schools in the district.

- The school has too many difficulties, and it hasn't improved despite multiple attempts.

- If students can go to better high schools nearby, they will interact with higher-achieving students, have new teachers, and really have a better shot at succeeding.

C. Bring in a dynamic new principal and allow him or her to hire a different group of teachers with new ideas and a better history of helping kids learn.

- The school will still be there for the community and the students, but it will have new, more skilled leadership.

- Giving the principal the ability to bring in new staff will mean that the learning environment will be very different.

D. Close the school and replace it with one of the new charters that has a good track record in helping to educate struggling students.

- The new charter school would have different teachers and a new approach.

- Because it's a charter school, it could hire and fire teachers based on their effectiveness, not on how long they've been teaching and the rules of the union.

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[19] Public Agenda researchers modified the case study and the competing options in the different focus groups to improve public understanding and probe respondents' concerns.

Most of the parents were eager to wrestle with the choices, but at the outset, they unanimously rejected all of the choices that involved closing the school or replacing the current principal. The moderator asked the parents to talk about each of the four choices separately and introduced arguments for and against each of them.

Given the lopsided support for Option A (breaking the school into four academies, but keeping the same staff and principal), the moderator emphasized the potential problems with this approach: "What do you say to those who believe that this is not enough of a change?" the moderator asked. "The teachers who were not doing that great are still there, and without new leadership, the school may fall behind again."

Similarly, given the lopsided opposition to the other alternatives, the moderator emphasized arguments in favor of those. For example, in discussing the idea of closing the school and allowing parents to send their children to higher performing public schools nearby (Option B), parents were asked whether it was really fair to keep students in such a low-performing school when there were higher-performing schools they could attend not so far away: "Shouldn't these students be able to have the same chance at a good education that kids who go to better schools have?" the moderator asked.

In discussing the idea of bringing in a new principal and staff who have had excellent success elsewhere (Option C), the moderator pointed out that some people argue that this gives students a much better chance at learning, but without closing the school and without much disruption to the community.

In discussing the idea of closing the school and opening a new charter school (Option D), the moderator stressed the excellent track record of the proposed charter working in low-income neighborhoods with students who had struggled previously. The moderator also emphasized that people who lead charter schools would be held accountable for meeting district academic goals. If they don't show progress, their charter could be revoked. The moderator pointed out that this isn't the case in traditional public systems.

As the discussion proceeded, the moderator often upped the ante, reiterating that there had been repeated attempts to help the school by providing more resources and support, but little had changed. The vast majority of the participants listened attentively and clearly weighed the pros and cons. A substantial number reconsidered their initial ideas during the discussion. In each of the focus groups, some of the parents became more supportive of the proposal to bring in a new principal and staff with good experience in turning struggling schools around. But in the end, none of the parents said that closing a school is the best choice, even after getting more information and having a chance to think about the arguments in favor of it. Moreover, people in the focus groups received their information from a moderator who had already established a strong level of trust and confidence prior to raising the issue. For most of these parents, the potential loss to the community is simply too powerful an argument against closing schools.

These "choice work" discussions are illuminating, showing how typical parents weigh and think through these alternatives. They show how strong concerns about closing schools are, but also that some parents are open to bolder options if they have an opportunity to think more about them. These discussions also revealed two other very useful insights.

THE PROS AND CONS
OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter schools are "publicly funded elementary or secondary schools that have been freed from some of the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to other public schools, in exchange for some type of accountability for producing a certain result,"[20] and opinion researchers have explored public and parent attitudes about them in several national studies. In Phi Delta Kappa's national survey question asking about the best way to address the problems of a persistently failing school, only 13 percent of the public opted for the solution of closing the failing school and opening a charter school in its place. More than half of the public wanted to retain the existing principal and teachers, but give the school "comprehensive outside support."[21]

In 2009, researchers at Harvard's Program on Education Policy and Governance also looked at the public's views on charter schools and concluded that many Americans may be "persuadable" that charters are a helpful option, even though current attitudes about them are divided. Asked about charter schools without being given any information about them, nearly 4 in 10 Americans favored charter schools, 44 percent opposed them, and 17 percent were not sure. When the respondents were told that President Obama backs the development of charter schools, support jumped to 50 percent. When respondents were told that "a recent study presents evidence that students learn more in charter schools than in public schools," support reached 53 percent.[22] These dramatic shifts in the level of support show that much of the public is open to charter

schools. These findings also reveal how little people currently know about charters and how unstable polling on this issue can be—just a couple of grains of information made a big difference.

Many of our focus group participants had experience with charter schools or knew about charters in their communities, and they often had very good things to say about them. The discussions also demonstrated that although many parents are quite receptive to having more charter options, most did not see charter schools as public schools, and many worried that having too many charters could undermine their goal of having a strong, flourishing "public school system."

A father in Detroit commented:

> *"There are enough students that Detroit public schools can exist. Detroit public charter schools can exist, and private schools can exist, but the thing is, I have the problem with [charter schools] trying to inundate the whole district and basically replace the district with charter schools. I have a big problem with that."*

In Washington, D.C., one father suggested that when families place their children in private schools or charters, they are less committed to the public schools and less likely to pressure government to make them better:

> *"The best way to improve public schools, particularly in a place like D.C., would be to abolish all the private schools… [Then] these parents would be actively involved [and local schools would improve]."*

[20] National Education Association, *Charter Schools,* www.nea.org/charter.

[21] Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, *Highlights of the 2010 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll*, September, 2010, Page 11, http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/docs/2010_Poll_Report.pdf.

[22] Education Next/Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance, *2009 Education Next-PEPG Survey of Public Opinion*, Fall 2009, http://educationnext.org/persuadable-public/

At heart, what most of the parents in the Public Agenda focus groups seemed to be saying is that they wanted their traditional neighborhood public school to be a good school, and most seemed to view charters, even though they are public institutions, as a very different entity. Replacing a failing school with a new charter school or giving people the option to send their children to better traditional public schools elsewhere did not seem to ease their sense of loss and disappointment that the school they were familiar with—right there in their own neighborhood—was closing.

THE PROS AND CONS OF "OUTSIDE" EXPERTISE

Given the challenge of turning around schools that have been ineffective for years, it is understandable and desirable that leaders would look across the nation and around the world for promising ideas and seek out the advice and expertise of educators who have had success no matter where they work. Breaking the cycle of failure in these schools is going to depend on trying new ideas. But based on the research conducted for this project, the search for new ideas and best practices needs to be blended with approaches that are more closely attuned to the communities and neighborhoods where these schools operate. There was also a strong sense among the parents we interviewed that, in their view, the communities themselves should be seen as sources of new thinking.

In the focus groups, one-on-one expert interviews, and in the communications and engagement strategy session, the importance of local knowledge and connections emerged repeatedly. Here's how one school turnaround

expert we interviewed described it:

"When you take a 2,000-student, dysfunctional school and redesign it completely, it is something that the whole community has to be aware of, understand, and feel that they were consulted at least in the approach to changing this old, traditional school—that many of the parents went to themselves and in many ways is a source of pride to the community. So, just to walk in and say, 'We're going to turn this thing upside down'—we saw some of the early work in this area, and it was very confusing to parents."

A national expert at the strategy session said:

"We keep on talking about education and systemic reform. Frankly, it's not about that. [Reformers] get frustrated that we can't move through, make the changes, count the impact, define the metrics. I think what we're hearing back from these communities is, 'I have something different to say here…' It's a very big challenge to listen to the authentic voices of people, and then be able to act with them, not on them."

Another national leader commented on why bringing in completely packaged ideas from outside may not be effective:

"There's no community plan for what happens next. The vision of the future [that is depicted] is not for the community of people who are present and accounted for, but [for] someone else. This is... [rarely] brought to the surface. It [often] comes out as an issue of race. 'Is this turnaround going to

benefit somebody other than the people who are here now?'"

Parents frequently emphasized how crucial it is for school leaders and reformers to understand the specific challenges, issues, and assets available in their own community.

The concerns often appeared when the parents thought about the option of bringing in a new principal and staff to work in a troubled school. In the focus group materials, the new principal was described as "dynamic," and the moderator repeatedly stressed that the new principal and teachers would be selected because of their proven track records working in troubled schools with struggling students. But many of the parents were not reassured, emphasizing that the new principal needed to be familiar with their community and their specific situation in order to succeed.

In Washington, D.C., for example, the moderator asked the parents whether it would be better to select a new principal who was inexperienced, but had "a very similar background" to that of the community, or a more experienced principal "from a different type of school district." Most of the parents preferred a principal with a community background. Here is the exchange:

Moderator: Who [should be the new] principal? Should it be an experienced principal who may not know this district well, or a brand new principal?

Parent 1: [A] brand new principal that knows the community.

Parent 2: I would say a principal that's familiar with the dynamics that they're working with [in the community].

Moderator: But not familiar with being a principal?

Parent 2: Not necessarily…as long as they have the credentials to be a principal. [It's more important] that they know the dynamics of what they're dealing with.

What's more, a number of the parents talked at length about their concerns that the new principal might not be invested in their community because he or she is coming from the outside. Clearly some parents were concerned by the churn they have seen in district and school leadership over the years. A Detroit parent said this:

> *"You have new principals and a new assistant principal [but] how can we become a family and build a safe learning environment when we don't even know who is going to be principal next year? [The principal] might have a job application out at two or three different schools, and [next year] we've got to start all over again."*

The takeaway here is not that most parents literally want a newbie principal rather than a seasoned and very successful principal from outside their community. These parents believe that any principal and any group of teachers will be hard-pressed to succeed if they don't understand the community and if they're not committed to it.

III. Communications and Engagment 101:

Eight Ideas That Can Help Leaders Build Trust and Promote More Constructive Dialogue

The advice in this section is culled mainly from the strategy session of education, communications, and public engagement experts convened by Public Agenda in May 2011. The participants included national education policy experts, heads of leading education organizations, prominent community and parent advocates, and an array of professionals from the world of public relations, advertising, politics, and community engagement (a list of participants is on page 36). This section also contains guidance based on Public Agenda's own experience, both analyzing public attitudes and observing how people cope with change, along with our work over the last 20 years organizing community forums and public engagement campaigns on education issues. Here are eight principles to keep in mind:

1. LAY THE GROUNDWORK BY TALKING WITH PARENTS, STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND COMMUNITY LEADERS AND RESIDENTS EARLY AND OFTEN.

The first piece of advice from the communications and engagement pros is: talking to people after the decision has been made is too late. School leaders and reformers need to reach out to parents, teachers, students, and others in the community early and often to hear their concerns and ideas about how to best improve the schools locally. In fact, several of the communications experts identified "the failure to communicate" as a long-standing problem in the school reform movement, one that comes to a head when controversies about closing schools or changing school leadership surface.

Reaching out to the community and establishing a genuine two-way exchange of ideas about improving schools and ramping up student learning offers several benefits.

◗ In situations where communication between communities and "the central office" has been virtually non-existent for decades, reaching out to the community is an essential step in building—or re-building—a sense of trust and mutual respect. Without that trust, every statistic, every study, and every proposal may be greeted with suspicion.

- School leaders need to convince parents, students, and community residents that they are invested in the community and its future. School leaders who can't spare the time to talk to parents and hear their concerns and ideas are going to be hard-pressed convincing people that they genuinely have the community's best interests at heart.

- School leaders who take on bold change will need allies in the community. Talking to people and hearing their ideas and concerns is a good way to find these potential allies and make them part of the change process.

As one communications pro put it:

> "There should be a process for getting or trying to get buy-in months ahead of time, [a time] for telling parents and teachers and everyone in the community what the situation is… It shouldn't be a sort of 'gotcha' atmosphere."

Another expert emphasized that the process of building trust can't be put on fast forward:

> "In order to build trust, promote dialogue, and have real engagement, it requires time. We all want to see changes in our schools, and we want to see the dramatic action…but real engagement can't happen…[without] a meaningful investment of time."

2. THERE HAS TO BE A VISION.

When local public schools are being closed and replaced with charters or when they are re-designed or broken apart, people need to have a vision of what will take their place. Here's what often happens, at least as far as most people perceive it. School leaders say that a school is bad and should be closed, and then there are public hearings about whether the school should close or not. The press reports all the statistics about how ineffective the school is and how divided people are over whether it should be closed. The negative information and the bad news are repeated over and over. In the meantime, there is little or no discussion about how things could be better or what kind of school might serve the children and the community best. One of the communication experts at the strategy session pointed out:

> "There's a difference between information about how bad things are and information about how good they could be. If you go in with just information about how bad things are, and you provide a lot of statistics and data, [and] you leave it there and walk out of the room, you've left people without a lot of hope."

When that happens, people naturally focus on the loss they feel and their anger at what is happening to their school. Confusion and fear fuel growing resentment. This creates questions about who benefits from a school turnaround and why it's being done—and, in some communities, it can inflame tensions around race and poverty.

Leaders often assume—because plans exist in white papers and studies or because there were previous announcements or press releases—that people understand (or should understand) that something better is on its way. But that's not how communications works in real life. "The district has to have a strategy beyond closing," one expert said. "The leadership issue is not just about, 'How do we push through a closing?' It is, 'What is the strategy to deal with these schools and make them better?'" Another of our experts said:

> "All you know as a parent is what you have in front of you. It's not fair for us to assume that people know how to make things better or different or that parents are going to embrace the idea of change without having a picture of what that change looks like. Show them a community like theirs…that's being successful, and…you're going to have a lot more buy-in."

The bottom line for reformers and school leaders is that delivering the bad news without giving people a sense of hope for the future is a recipe for public backlash.

> *The bottom line for reformers and school leaders: delivering bad news without giving people a sense of hope for the future is sure to invite public backlash.*

3. INVITE THE COMMUNITY TO HELP SHAPE THE VISION.

Having "the entire community" work out the details of a school turnaround plan is not realistic or practical, and it's not really what most parents and residents expect or want. After all, communities aren't monolithic. People will disagree. Discussions could go on indefinitely. At some point, school leaders have to make some decisions and put the building blocks in place—and most people accept that.

But this doesn't mean that reformers and leaders can't invite community members to help shape a broad vision of what kinds of school they want and what kinds of changes they think are most necessary and likely to be successful in their particular situation. In fact, to be sustained for any length of time, a vision must be supported by people beyond the key decision makers. Any vision with power and genuine potential for change must

be shared by a fairly broad swath of parents, teachers, students, and the general public. Here's a sampling of the advice from the communications strategy session:

"It's clear that parents and community have to be part of creating the vision for what happens in the schools… We may think we have the best idea for what goes on in the school and what goes on in the communities, but often times we drive into those communities, and we drive back out at night."

"You don't start with your decision and try to sell it. You start by saying 'Here's the situation. What we're trying to do is make the schools better…we're all in this together. If closing the school is the choice [that's going to be] made, then that's the choice [that will be] made, but we don't know that yet…' That's where we make a big mistake sometimes: going in with what we want done and just pushing it through."

"[Things are] not going to change until we [recognize] the importance of having parents, community, and young people involved…[until the community] is included."

"People who wish to help bring positive change [to schools]…must be open to input and collaboration, and they must be prepared to be wrong sometimes— to learn from their mistakes and to reconsider their initiatives and policies in light of evidence and public responses."

The community and parent advocates who attended the strategy session stressed that community members have a right to be included in these discussions and that they have important insights and experiences to bring to the table. One parent activist described her frustration at being ignored and having her group's ideas dismissed out of hand:

"We brought [research and ideas for school improvement]. It was denied. What do you do when [the district] says, 'That's not our vision'? …We never come to the table without having something concrete. We are even willing to give on certain things. We know we don't know everything. Maybe [the Department of Education] knows something that we're not thinking about. [But] we're denied at every level… We're tired of standing at City Hall, having rallies and shutting down meetings."

A few experts pointed to yet another reason why decision makers should give community members a seat at the table in school turnaround decisions: they don't come with a warranty. Since experts can't promise that school turnarounds will always work as planned, communities should have a role in making the decision. As one communications expert who specialized in education told us:

"We know that one size doesn't fit all. It's very clear that four sizes don't fit anybody. But we're not in a good position to tell people we have a better way. That's all the more reason to work with the public to develop strategies that are endemic to their needs."

4. PROVIDE INFORMATION—NOT TOO LITTLE AND NOT TOO MUCH.

The need for more information that is easily digestible about schools and school turnaround plans and options surfaced repeatedly in the strategy session, though most of the communications and engagement experts agreed that "more information" by itself was not an effective strategy for involving communities and parents. They stressed that parents rarely have enough information to know whether their child's school is underperforming. Some pointed to the tendency of school officials to reassure parents and gloss over problems, or just to sidestep communications entirely. One of the parent activists at the strategy session said:

> "We're surprised when parents don't know [that their school is doing poorly. [But] they're being told that everything is great in their school… They're told, 'Everything's wonderful. Please go home.'"

A community engagement expert reported similar problems in his state:

> "We've had several districts around [the state] where people weren't given any information. Then the importance of [information] is always brushed aside. There are even some communities where they weren't even given a letter saying that the school was closed."

The drawback in leaving parents uninformed about how schools perform until there's a crisis is that leaders are then in the position of delivering double-whammy bad news— first the unwelcome message that your child is attending a severely troubled school, and second, we're closing the school by such-and-such date. When people are caught unaware and bad news comes suddenly, they don't have the time to absorb or think about it. They are far more likely to resist.

Consequently, some experts recommended working to create a baseline of public understanding over time, but with the caveat that school leaders will need to stretch themselves to do it in ways that are credible and easy to understand. One expert explained:

> "We need to have an honest discussion as districts about where our schools are. There's always lots of talk about having a report card, but the report card isn't utilized easily by anybody… For most people the metrics aren't in a format that [allows them to understand which schools are] at risk and…the potential of [their own school] being closed down."

Some of the experts cautioned against putting out a stream of relentlessly negative information about local schools, warning that it can create a sense of helplessness and hopelessness:

> "From what I've seen, parents are reluctant to accept the fact that their kid's school [is underperforming] since to do so reflects badly on them. It means that they've made a poor decision, didn't know what questions to ask, were too easily taken in by the school's hype. The messaging to parents [should instead be]: here are tools to give them the power to do better for their own kids… Parents and kids [should] be given assurance that they need not be afraid of change."

Another consideration is that parents do not generally judge a school's effectiveness based on academics alone. Most care deeply about their children's academic progress, but they may be equally concerned about whether the school is safe and orderly, whether it stresses good behavior and strong character, and whether the principal and the staff are caring and nurturing. Sometimes schools make enormous strides in these non-academic areas, and parents and residents see the current situation as a vast improvement over "what used to be" even though the school is still academically inadequate. This often seems to be an issue with underperforming charter schools. Report cards and ratings systems that focus solely on academics may seem incomplete to some parents. Leaders need to help parents understand that good schools succeed in all these areas. They really don't have to choose.

It's also worth remembering one ground rule of good communications in just about any situation: information that's presented in formats that invite people to ask questions, exchange views, and make suggestions can be far more effective than the world's most polished PowerPoint thrown up on a screen at a news conference or public hearing.

5. REMEMBER TO TELL STORIES.

Communication and public relations experts frequently point out that many people, perhaps most people, learn and retain more from hearing a compelling story than from being exposed to a litany of statistics.[23] Stories have memorable characters, specific settings, rich and interesting details, and a narrative structure that brings people into the situation. Stories are a highly effective form of communication. They don't replace more comprehensive statistical information, but they can give the statistics life and meaning. And there are a whole host of stories related to the school turnaround issue that need to be told:

◗ What happens in a school when a gifted, vibrant, and caring new principal and staff focus all their energies on helping students learn;

◗ What happens when a student who was attending a failing school gets a chance to attend a better school;

◗ Who are the people who would be designing a new charter school and what are their stories;

◗ What happens when a community comes together to truly support a school turnaround and when friends and neighbors get together to encourage student learning;

◗ What is lost when students attend schools that don't give them the education they deserve.

The stories are there, and telling them could help many more parents and community members begin to see a vision of how much better their schools could be.

[23] See for example Andy Goodman, *Storytelling as Best Practice (Fifth Ed.),* at http://www.agoodmanonline.com/publications/storytelling/index.html.

6. IF YOU CAN, AVOID THE STANDARD "PUBLIC HEARING" FORMAT—OR AT LEAST DON'T RELY ON IT AS YOUR SOLE COMMUNICATION VEHICLE.

In most states and cities, public hearings are required as part of the policymaking process, but more than one of the communications and engagement experts at the strategy session bemoaned this standard format, describing it as especially alienating and counterproductive. School leaders and city officials sit at tables in the front of the room; community residents are allotted a minute or two to make their comments while partisans on both sides of the issue hold up placards, cheering the people "on their side" and jeering at their opponents. This is not a setting that encourages thoughtfulness or any viable

exchange of viewpoints. Here is the danger according to one of the communications experts:

> *"When distrust is rampant, the last thing you should do is hold a counterfeit dialogue. It's better to have nothing than a 'for show' dialogue. I know this is sometimes not possible, given some of the restrictions around public meetings, but the town hall format is really dreary. It just invites awful discussion. If you can find other ways— within legal constraints—[then think about having] smaller meetings, multiple meetings, smaller group discussions. You would be wise to do so because town halls have been hijacked. There are really bad things that come out of them."*

Smaller, more informal discussions with key groups on a regular basis may help build a better basis for communication and mutual respect. The public engagement field has made important strides developing meeting formats and materials that encourage a more open, civil, and genuine exchange of ideas (see page 38 for more).

In the strategy session, many of the experts believed that the school improvement process could be more successful if more conversations took place at the school-building level—meeting directly with parents, teachers, and students in the school—rather than at the district or city level. In a school-based setting, the conversation can center on what the parents' own children might gain from the turnaround process—how the school will be improved or what the options would be for parents if a school is closing. One community engagement specialist said:

> "I don't think most parents are going to be that engaged on [district-level change]... It's got to be something that really matters to them. The value proposition [must be] immediate… If you look at most parent activists, [they say], 'Well, I started when this happened in my kids' school.'"

Another expert believed that the schools themselves—especially those planning major changes or bringing in new leadership and staff—should think about engaging with the community as a way to sustain support for a turnaround.

> "Schools also…need to go out in the community, and not just on Saturday and Sunday knocking on the door, but be at the church festivals and the street festivals in order to start to build trust

> and to be able to even start dialogue… If you start to become part of the community, you need to actually go out in order, I think, to bring [people] in."

This basic principle could apply to both public turnarounds and to new charters opening up in place of schools that have closed.

In instances where new leaders, staff, and policies are being brought in, but the school building and identity are being preserved, some of the experts recommended using the building itself as a channel of communication. If the aim is to rally the community in support of change, then leaders should not miss the opportunity to leverage the community's emotional connection to the building to support the turnaround process.

7. COMMUNICATE THROUGH TRUSTED SOURCES.

With a skeptical public and a tough message to deliver, reformers and school leaders would be well advised to put in extra effort to reach out to trusted and respected members of the community throughout the turnaround process–to learn from them, to plan with them to develop the best approach possible, to help explain what is happening and why. One of the strategy session participants noted:

> "It's so important that the leader [who] is pushing this through…has the trust of key people in the community… Sometimes that's where the change is really needed."

In Public Agenda's research, local employers and local higher education officials are often credible and very persuasive voices for parents. The research also shows that teachers have strong credibility, and in most cases,

they have more one-on-one conversations with parents and students than state and district officials could ever hope to have. That means that reaching out to teachers and bringing them into the turnaround process wherever possible can be a real plus. Some teachers, of course, are part of the problem, and sometimes they are vocal opponents of change, but every school and every community has teachers who pour heart and soul into helping their students. Most are looking for ways to be more effective, and most want to work with skilled, caring principals in schools that really deliver for the kids. Here's how one expert at the strategy session put it:

> "Teachers…are often the ones that are trusted, that have a personal connection with parents… Some of the most powerful [school turnaround] strategies that we've seen work when the teachers are engaged."

Establishing these kinds of relationships and connections, of course, cannot happen at the last minute. Reformers and leaders need to reach out to potential allies and partners in the community long before the final decisions are made and the final plans are in place.

School turnarounds present an especially difficult communications challenge because of the intense emotions that surface and because they involve such dramatic change for so many people. There is no formula that will make them easy or trouble-free.

8. DON'T SURPRISE PEOPLE—AND DON'T MANGLE COMMUNICATIONS BASICS.

One of the most disappointing observations emerging from the project is that many school leaders working on turnarounds are making a tough situation even worse by making breathtakingly clumsy communications mistakes. Here's one example provided by one of the parent activists we interviewed:

> "So the [school district] sent a letter home on Wednesday…in the kids' backpacks that said, 'Your school is slated to be merged with [another school]… This will be presented at the meeting of the school committee tonight at 6 o'clock.' That's how we found out… The teachers found out at a staff meeting at 8:00 a.m. that morning… This is not how you talk to families if you want them to stay."

Surprising people, delivering bad news thoughtlessly or cavalierly, ignoring community ideas and concerns, or showing disrespect for people's sense of pain and loss when a school is slated to be closed— these are communications missteps that will derail any school turnaround no matter how well planned. One participant at the strategy session described a town hall meeting where the superintendent spent much of the meeting typing on a Blackberry instead of listening to and talking with the parents. No wonder people were upset.

A number of the communications experts stressed the importance of avoiding the element of surprise when delivering bad news. Most people need time to absorb and adjust to troubling news, so suddenly

announcing changes that will affect thousands of families and community residents without warning and with minimal explanation increases the shock and anger. "Surprising the public is almost always a bad idea," one expert said. "The need for confidentiality is overrated. The need for early discussion that's authentic is underrated."

This expert went on to describe an experience in the corporate world working on a plant closing announcement. Before the decision was made public, the company arranged for senior staff to call key people in the community to let them know personally. The staff members made the calls simultaneously so that none of the key leaders were caught off guard. What did they say? They explained why the company had made the decision, reiterated their regret that this is the way things turned out, and outlined plans to help workers who would be laid off.

The plant closing example brings up another communications basic—you need to be ready with follow-up information and a plan for next steps. Before the plant closing announcement, the company had thought through some steps to mitigate the pain their decision would cause. They were ready from day one to explain where and how workers could get help and exactly what was going to happen, when, and why.

Naturally people are still upset at hearing the news that a school is closing, but with good planning and communications, the damage is more contained and confined. When people don't know the facts, rumors spread. When people don't know what will happen, they focus intently on what they've lost. School leaders need to be ready with specific information about what the future will hold

and what families, teachers, and others in the community can expect to happen.

The basics of good communications are not especially mysterious. They include planning, empathy, and taking a moment to think about what the listener will hear and what questions a listener might have. School turnarounds present an especially difficult communications challenge because of the intense emotions that surface and because they involve such dramatic change for so many people.

There is no formula that will make the communications surrounding school turnarounds and school closings easy or trouble-free. But that means that not losing sight of communications basics is more crucial than ever. By emphasizing the ground rules of good communications, parents, students, teachers, and others in the community will at least feel that they are being treated with courtesy and respect.

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How the Research Was Done

One-on-one interviews with nearly 40 individuals:

◗ 13 parent advocates, who have publicly spoken out on the issue

◗ 10 leaders working locally with school turnarounds or community engagement

◗ 10 national experts and thinkers

◗ 5 school or district leaders

Focus groups with parents/guardians of public school students:

◗ Detroit, Michigan; Washington, D.C.; Denver, Colorado and Chicago, Illinois

◗ Groups of parents were recruited to be representative of the cities they came from, and didn't have prior knowledge of the topic of the focus group beforehand.

◗ Focus groups and interviews allow for an in-depth exploration of the dynamics underlying the public's attitudes toward complex issues. Public Agenda's 'deliberative' focus group method, asking participants to weigh trade-offs and consider particulars, allow us to identify why people might think the way they do on an issue.

Strategy session on May 23, 2011, with support from the Joyce Foundation, the Skillman Foundation, and the Eli and Edyth Broad Foundation:

◗ Washington, D.C.

◗ Entitled "What's Trust Got to Do With It? Engaging Communities in Transforming Persistently Failing Schools".

◗ The purpose was to gather insights on how to improve communications and outreach when states and districts take bold action to transform deeply inadequate schools, including closing or fundamentally reshaping the leadership, programs, and staffing at these schools.

◗ Attracted more than 50 participants, including:

  ◗ Education experts focused on the mission of transforming inadequate schools

  ◗ Education policymakers in the Department of Education, major teachers' unions, and foundations

  ◗ Representatives from community and parent groups focused on this issue

  ◗ Communications and engagement specialists

◗ The day-long session consisted of a presentation of Public Agenda's research on the challenges of community engagement in school turnarounds nationwide, as well as a discussion between Diane Ravitch, Research Professor at NYU's Steinhardt School, and Chester Finn, President of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation; Ruth Wooden, who previously headed both Public Agenda and The Ad Council, also gave an overview of "communications basics".

◗ Some participants provided additional written or phone comments later and these have been included in this report where appropriate.

List of Strategy Session Participants

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List of Strategy Session Participants (cont.)

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National Governors' Association

Randi Weingarten
President,
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

Ruth Wooden
Board Member &
Senior Advisor,
Public Agenda

Other Resources

For leaders looking for additional advice on communications and engagement on turnarounds, these organizations and publications have helpful information:

PUBLIC AGENDA

Nearly all of Public Agenda's opinion studies on K-12 education are available online at www.publicagenda.org. Moreover, the website's section for 'public engagers' houses guides to planning and moderating community conversations, video discussion starters, and reports on what other communities have done. Public Agenda's primer on public engagement reviews the basics. It's at www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/public_engagement_primer_0.pdf.

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION

The Kettering Foundation has worked with communities nationwide exploring ways they can use community conversations and other engagement practices to address local and regional challenges. The Foundation's research and publications on public education, available at www.kettering.org, are especially useful. The Foundation's recent work on community responses to the achievement gap is summarized in the video, No Textbook Answer, available at www. kettering.org/achievementgap.

THE NATIONAL ISSUES FORUM (NIF)

The Issues Forums are a "network of civic, educational, and other organizations and individuals, whose common interest is to promote public deliberation in America." Over time, it has "grown to include thousands of civic clubs, religious organizations, libraries, schools, and many other groups that meet to discuss critical public issues." Not surprisingly, the website at www.nifi.org contains practical advice on how to organize and moderate community forums, and NIF has prepared a number of citizen discussion guides on K-12 issues that are useful in getting local conversations started.

NATIONAL COALITION FOR DIALOGUE & DELIBERATION

NCDD is a clearing house of information by and for organizations that focus on "conflict resolution and public engagement." The group provides a number of useful tools and guides, and its Resource Guide on Public Engagement is a good introduction to the field. More information can be found on their website, www.ncdd.org.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Want to find out more about Public Agend's distinct approach to improving public life? Interested in connecting with other citizens to address critical issues? If so, you can check out our online community and sign up to find out about activities that bring people together to strengthen their communities. Email us at publicengagement@publicagenda.org. You can also keep in touch by becoming a fan on Facebook or by following us on Twitter @PublicAgenda.

Related Publications from Public Agenda

Several publications from Public Agenda or focusing specifically on Public Agenda's opinion research and public engagement work may also be helpful.

The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation by Public Agenda founder and president Daniel Yankelovich lays out a set of communications principles aimed at reducing tension and enhancing understanding among groups and individuals with different viewpoints.

You Can't Do It Alone: A Communications and Engagement Manual for School Leaders Committed to Reform by Jean Johnson (forthcoming in 2012 from Rowman & Littlefield) recaps a decade of Public Agenda opinion research among parents, students, teachers, and the general public, and summarizes the organization's theory of change and public learning.

Toward Wiser Public Judgment, edited by Daniel Yankelovich and William Friedman, is a collection of articles by authors with experience and expertise in engagement and dialogue, including experts from Public Agenda, the Kettering Foundation, and National Issues Forums, among others.

About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and public engagement organization. We work to ensure that the public has the best possible conditions and opportunities to engage thoughtfully in public life and that decision making by leaders is well-informed by people's values, ideas, and aspirations. Our programs aim to inform public policy, strengthen communities, and empower citizens.

About Our Funders

The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation is a national philanthropy established by entrepreneur Eli Broad that invests in the bold and innovative transformation of K-12 urban public education in the U.S. so that students of all backgrounds are academically prepared for college, careers and life. The Broad Foundation supports efforts to put in place working conditions and innovations that empower teachers and students to succeed in the classroom, attract the best and brightest Americans into the classroom, and ensure resources reach the classroom. The Broad Foundation's Internet address is www.broadeducation.org, and foundation updates are available on Twitter.

The Joyce Foundation supports efforts to protect the natural environment of the Great Lakes, to reduce poverty and violence in the region, and to ensure that its people have access to good schools, decent jobs, and a diverse and thriving culture. We are especially interested in improving public policies, because public systems such as education and welfare directly affect the lives of so many people, and because public policies help shape private sector decisions about jobs, the environment, and the health of our communities. To ensure that public policies truly reflect public rather than private interests, we support efforts to reform the system of financing election campaigns.

Created in 1960, The Skillman Foundation is a private philanthropy whose chief aim is to help develop good schools and good neighborhoods for children. Though grants are made throughout metropolitan Detroit, most grants are directed at six Detroit neighborhoods–Brightmoor, Osborn, Cody Rouge, Chadsey Condon, Northend Central Woodward and Southwest Detroit Neighborhoods–and toward innovative and successful schools throughout the city of Detroit.