Preface

At the beginning of a new millennium, the challenges faced by America's public schools are overwhelming at best. Public school teachers serve a student population with increasingly diverse needs. In any given classroom, you may find special education students; gifted students; students who speak very limited, if any, English; students of average ability; and students whose circumstances at home make it very difficult for them to learn. The impact of societal challenges like poverty, homelessness, teen pregnancy, violence, and drug abuse can be seen every day in our classrooms.

At the same time, public schools are facing the mandate for greater accountability. Test scores are routinely used to compare school districts, and the debate over high-stakes testing rages on. The Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind" initiative calls for higher standards to be applied to all students, with annual testing in reading and mathematics to document results. Sixty-seven percent of the Americans sampled in the 34th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll (Rose &Gallup, 2002) favor the use of annual testing to track student progress, and 68% support the use of a nationally standardized test.

Clearly, the demands on public schools have increased. Unfortunately, the resources available to public schools have not been able to keep pace with these increased demands. Politicians face more pressure from voters to lower their taxes. State funding formulas become more complex, and the disparities that result often shortchange the districts in greatest need. More school districts are finding it necessary to go to the

voters with additional bond and levy referenda for building, renovation, and operating funds. Expenses for social and health services, transportation, and technology continue to increase, leaving fewer resources for regular classroom instruction.

A predicted teacher shortage places even more pressure on the resources available for regular classroom instruction. Demographic analysis indicates that, as a group, American teachers are aging. Currently, two-thirds of the approximately 2.8 million public school teachers in the United States are 40 years old or older (Ward, 2000). Retirements, combined with a high rate of attrition among teachers, will result in a projected national demand of 2 to 2.5 million teachers by the year 2013. American colleges and universities generate slightly more than 100,000 bachelor's degree graduates in education annually. The supply of new teachers is unable to keep pace with demand, for a number of reasons. Low salaries, the challenging nature of teaching, and the lack of opportunity for career advancement discourage many young people from considering a career in education. Current certification requirements make it difficult for older adults to make a mid-career move into teaching.

As if the financial and human resource pressures on public schools were not enough, most schools have experienced diminished parental and community involvement in recent years. Work by Robert Putnam (2000) and others has documented the fact that Americans are less engaged with their public institutions than they were 50 years ago. This phenomenon is due to a number of factors, which include urban sprawl, pressures of time and money, the popularity of electronic entertainment, and the birth of post–World War II generations who lack the civic-mindedness of their elders (Putnam, 2000).

Could this disengaged public become a driving force in creating a brighter future for public schools? Suspend judgment for a moment and consider the possibilities. If the public were truly to become a partner with public schools in educating our

children, we would ultimately see an improvement in student achievement. A recent review of the education literature confirms that the involvement of family and community members has a significant impact on student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). More involved parents and community members mean more adults working together to educate children both within and outside the classroom. An engaged public means more people working together to find the best approaches to the need for adequate funding and school accountability.

But where are there any signs of hope? A 2002 poll, conducted by Public Education Network and Education Week, revealed that Americans rank education second only to the economy and jobs in terms of national priority (Puriefoy & Edwards, 2002). This poll also found that Americans see public schools as a critical community resource. They believe that quality schools help build stronger families, improve local economies, and reduce crime rates. School quality also influences where Americans choose to live, and education plays a major role in determining their choices in the voting booth. Education is a top-of-mind issue for most Americans.

CAN THIS BOOK BE HELPFUL TO ME?

The challenge to educators is leveraging this public interest in education to bring about citizen action in support of schools. What do we mean by "community engagement" and what strategies are available to make it happen? The value of community engagement has been well established, but resources that address the "how to" questions have unfortunately been more limited in number.

This book addresses that gap by providing a basic framework that can be used in designing and implementing initiatives to more effectively engage the community. K–12 school administrators, school board members, and teachers are the primary audience for this book, but community

leaders and citizens who are interested in improving student achievement through community engagement will also find the book to be useful.

Each chapter focuses on a key aspect of the community engagement process. In Chapter One, the reader is introduced to the concept of community engagement, along with evidence supporting the relationship between an engaged community and improved student achievement. Chapter Two addresses the creation of a planning team for the community engagement process, along with the selection of an appropriate issue to initiate the engagement process. Chapter Three provides guidance on identifying constituent groups within the community, while Chapter Four describes the techniques that can be used to better understand the expectations and perceptions of these different constituent groups. This insight is used in Chapter Five to design strategies that will be most effective in motivating constituents to act in support of improving student achievement. As examples, action in support of schools might include greater parent involvement in a child's education, more school/community partnerships, more volunteer support, or increased efforts to ensure that schools are adequately funded. Sustaining the ongoing process of community engagement is the focus of Chapter Six, with special emphasis on the training needed to create an engaged citizenry.

The following summary links each chapter of the book with key questions that readers might ask about the community engagement process:

Chapter 1: What is community engagement? Why is an engaged community important to student achievement?

Chapter 2: What types of issues might be addressed using a process of community engagement?

Chapter 3: Who should be included in the community engagement process?

Chapter 4: What techniques are available to help educators understand constituent perspectives and expectations?

Chapter 5: What strategies are effective in calling constituents to action?

Chapter 6: What kind of training can help educators and their constituents to be more effective in creating an engaged community?

With support from an engaged community, schools can do even more to help each student to achieve his or her full potential. The framework provided in this book will guide educators through each step of the community engagement process.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Closer to home, I have benefited from the encouragement given by my colleagues who teach economics and management studies at St. Olaf College. Our administrative assistant, Pat Hall, can solve any word processing problem that comes her way. Student assistants Holly Malcomson and Jennifer Serafin also contributed their time to the final stages of text preparation.

And last, but certainly not least, I am grateful to my family and friends who were patient and supportive throughout this entire process. They listened when I needed to talk, and they gave me time when I needed to write. My daughter, Claire, and my son, Jim, deserve a special thanks for sharing their mom with "the book."

The contributions of the following reviewers are gratefully acknowledged:

Robert D. Ramsey, Ed.D.
Freelance Education Writer
Minneapolis, MN

Steve Hutton, Ed.D.
Highly Skilled Educator
On loan to the Kentucky Department of Education
Villa Hills, KY

Patricia B. Schwartz, Ed.D.
Principal
Thomas Jefferson Middle School
Teaneck, NJ

Karen H. Kleinz
Associate Director
National School Public Relations Association
Rockville, MD

William G. O'Callaghan, Jr.
William G. O'Callaghan & Associates
Lakewood, OH
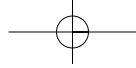
Dr. Dave Mathews
President & CEO
Kettering Foundation
Dayton, OH

Heather Voke
Visiting Researcher and Lecturer
Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.