**An Experiment in Democracy**

by John F. (Jack) Jennings

*Distrust is a very strong element in our society and is influencing our debates on national issues, such as the effectiveness of public education, Mr. Jennings points out. But distrust of and disappointment with the schools are just problems, not immutable conditions, and therefore they can be changed.*

EVERY generation coming of age since the 1950s has been less trusting than the previous one. Furthermore, the most distrustful members of society today are the youngest — those 18 to 23 years of age. These are the sobering results of 31 years of polling data, analyzed by Harvard University, the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation, and the Washington Post and published on 28 January 1996. These data help to explain why our public debates are so harsh. To a large degree, we do not believe that others can be trusted to do the right thing.

We can posit many reasons for this situation — from the growing influence of television to the waning feeling of national solidarity after the successful conclusion of the Second World War. Regardless of reason, the important factor is that distrust is a very strong element in our society and is influencing our debates on national issues, such as the effectiveness of public education.

In this special section of the Kappan, David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation writes about how the public is “halfway out the schoolhouse door” in its support for public schools. Deborah Wadsworth explains Public Agenda’s assertion that support for the institution of public education is “fragile and porous.” In last September’s Kappan I laid out my own impressions — based on my travels — about the reasons that the public doubts the effectiveness of the public schools.

Great mistrust in society, which leads to inaccurate assumptions, and the perceived shakiness of support for public education were two major — and interrelated — reasons why the Center on Education Policy (CEP) produced two booklets, Do We Still Need the Public Schools? and The Good — and the Not-So-Good — News About American Schools. Phi Delta Kappa printed these publications and distributed them widely last year and is continuing to do so. Our purpose is to remind people of why the U.S. developed public schools and to lay out the facts on the successes and failures of those schools.

The appearance of these booklets led Phi Delta Kappa to suggest a series of local forums on public education to explore the issues as framed in the publications. Lowell Rose, executive director emeritus of Phi Delta Kappa, was put in charge of the forums by the board of directors and by Ron Joekel, executive director. During the course of preparations, the National PTA expressed interest in co-sponsoring the forums, an offer that Phi Delta Kappa eagerly accepted. Lowell Rose’s article in this Kappan special section explains the organizational aspects of the forums, and Shirley Igo of the PTA articulates in her article the reasons for the PTA’s involvement.

The basic assumption of the forums is that important issues must be discussed among citizens at the local level. If our democracy is to function, we must dispel distrust among ourselves by talking to one another face to face. National public service advertisements, television programs on important topics, and demonstrations in state capitals are useful, but there is something especially meaningful about people sitting down and talking one-on-one or in small groups about such fundamental issues as why the country developed the public schools, how effective or ineffective they are, and what can be done to make them more effective.

A central requirement of these discussions is that people representing all major points of view in the community must be invited to participate. Home-schoolers, conservative religious critics of the public schools, and private school advocates must be included, along with businesspeople and representatives of community organizations and of ethnic and racial minorities. Teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board members must also be invited, but — if at all possible — people directly involved in the public schools should not make up the majority of participants.

Getting members of society who are not associated with the public schools to attend these local forums has been one of the hardest aims to achieve. The local organizers have frequently spent hours and hours trying to entice and cajole these people to come to the meetings, often with modest success. However, the most successful forums have been the ones in which all points of view were represented and educators were not in the majority.

I would speculate that a major reason why individuals not directly connected with the public schools were hard to attract was the pervasive mistrust that I mentioned above. Some people may have thought that any meeting about public schools sponsored by an educators’ group — Phi Delta Kappa — and by the
National PTA would be an attempt to persuade them of the need for the public schools and not an honest effort to have a full and open discussion of the issues. I also detected a reciprocal wariness on the part of educators toward those not connected with the schools. They seemed to fear that those people would be too critical of the schools and would not understand enough about the problems educators face. If my speculations are correct, these mutual misunderstandings reinforce the need to have such meetings, in which all points of view are represented. If we truly want a more trusting society, we must meet face to face and talk through our problems.

The National PTA, Phi Delta Kappa, and the Center on Education Policy are all advocates for the public schools, but we all recognize that those schools must be better than they currently are. The first step toward improvement is to agree on why public schools were created and on the facts about their successes and failures. Only then can we try to achieve agreement on how to bring about a better education for children in those schools. Support for public education must be rebuilt community by community, just as public education must be improved school by school while working at the same time to improve the overall system. That is difficult work, but the fruit of this labor is that you achieve lasting change.

I was the moderator at five of the 30 forums and have discussed the other forums with many others who participated. These are the recommendations I would make for future forums, based on those experiences.

First, most people enjoyed the exchange of views and the effort to reach agreement on these issues. It seems that there are very few opportunities today for people with varying points of view to sit down on relatively neutral turf to discuss important issues. Therefore, I conclude that the general idea is on target.

Second, the basic format of roughly three hours of discussion on three questions (an hour apiece) with people sitting at tables of eight to 10 per table is a very good way to structure the meetings. There are many ways to stimulate the conversations, such as using a participant poll and comparing the results to a national poll or using a film explaining why public schools were created. These devices are optional and worked better in some situations than in others. The important point is that the general structure of face-to-face conversations for roughly three hours seems to work. It is best to have few or no presentations by speakers because that allows time for people to talk to one another.

Third, much effort must go into persuading people with varying points of view to attend. Co-sponsorship with the local chamber of commerce, the local alliance of churches, or the local senior center might be a useful way to bring in those with differing views. When educators dominated the forums, less was accomplished than when community leaders, religious figures, businesspeople, and others were in the majority.

Fourth, at the end of the meeting, it is vitally important to discuss and reach agreement on where to go next. Although the organizers of the forums tended to be very tired at the conclusion of the meetings and thus preferred to postpone any discussion of next steps, the people who participated wanted to know where all this activity was leading. Some closure was needed to give a sense of accomplishment. Possibilities for follow-up activities include inviting the school board to respond to the recommendations of the participants, holding additional forums on particular topics, or conducting similar general forums in churches, senior centers, or other locations.

These are the four main recommendations that I would offer. There are some additional points that might help to make future meetings more effective. For instance, some work needs to be done on improving the data presented on the effectiveness of the schools — nationally, at the state level, and locally. Another area for further consideration is the best timing of the events. I found Saturday mornings least effective and after-work and early evening events with boxed meals most effective. The geographical area of focus is also important; I found it easier to get people engaged if the meeting looked at one school district rather than at all school districts in a state because of the variance in conditions statewide.

The most important factor to keep in mind is that holding one of these forums is just the beginning of a long-term process to rebuild support for public education and school improvement. Mounting them is very time-consuming, especially for teachers or parents who do not have ready access to copying machines and free mailing. The honesty involved in facing legitimate criticisms of public schools and the courage needed to rebut unfair accusations are also demanding and tiring.

We face great distrust in our society, and many of our fellow citizens are thinking of deserting the basic institution of public education. To address these problems will take time, energy, and nerve. But the distrust of and disappointment with the schools are just problems — they are not immutable conditions — and therefore they can be changed. As citizens we can do no finer thing than use the means of our democracy to rebuild support for our public schools and to make them better for children.
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(Print version published in V. 78, No. 10, June 1997, page 769.)