

Foreword

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DEMOCRACY'S STRENGTH lies in people's ability to understand and participate in decisions that affect them, their families, and their society. In the United States, we look to public education to sustain and reflect the promise of democracy by giving all children, regardless of race or class or language, access to high-quality schooling that prepares them for economic well-being and civic engagement. The links between democracy and public education are so deep that if one of them faces severe problems, as education does today, the other surely will as well. This threat to our social and political values certainly equals the more frequently invoked economic vulnerabilities that are expressed when discussing the shortcomings of public education.

Both Public Education Network (PEN) and the Ford Foundation value public engagement in public institutions as a means to strengthen those institutions and, at the same time, to foster the civic ties that are essential to democracy. Further, both organizations believe that educating all of our children to high standards entails a collective responsibility to move beyond self and parochial interests. Is there an untapped power for reform that could be released by joining these two social values—civic participation and the democratic distribution of educational opportunity? In 2005, PEN and the Ford Foundation convened a group of twenty-six prominent academics representing a wide array of perspectives to explore the relationship between public education reform and civic engagement. Unfortunately, we found frustratingly little in the research literature to support or guide a potential synergy of school reform and public engagement.

Research on public education reform has focused primarily at the school level. Few studies have explored how to reform public education at the community level—that is, how to engage the community to actively support education reform, demand accountability from elected officials, and push for adequate financial resources. Certainly, much strong organizing and public engagement on behalf of school reform is taking place across the country, but these efforts are underreported and insufficiently analyzed. We have strong indications that public engagement is a promising strategy for school reform, but taking engagement to scale requires far more credibility and visibility. In other words, school reform needs research-based evidence that public engagement can be effective; and it needs that evidence to be brought into focus as an area of inquiry in the arenas of academia, philanthropy, and education reform.

For many years research has accumulated on the limited efficacy of conventional “research, development, and dissemination” reform strategies—especially for improving schools for the nation’s most vulnerable young people. Reforms seeking to disrupt historic connections among race, social class, educational opportunities and schooling outcomes consistently have been distorted or abandoned during the implementation process. Accordingly, a growing number of scholars have concluded that successful “equity-focused” change must address political and normative challenges (for example, the power to make decisions along with the beliefs and values that shape those decisions) as well as technical challenges (for example, “best practices” for teaching or novel ways of organizing schools). Some recent studies have looked at the potential impact of including the members of less-powerful communities in formulating, adopting, and implementing reforms, in addition to professionals and elites who typically dominate these processes.

The 2005 convening of the PEN Scholars Forum led to a series of exchanges among social scientists attempting to understand how “community engagement” relates and contributes to better teaching and learning and to political philosophers who view public education as a public good. Over three years, the group reviewed and synthesized the research. They also deliberated about how empirical scholarship could shed light on public engagement when linked to school reform and lead to sustained changes in policy and practice. In sum, the scholars wanted to know if public engagement generates public responsibility for public education and if and how that responsibility matters.

We hope that this work at the nexus of public engagement and education reform will stimulate a field of study—public engagement—that encompasses

the research of the forum participants and other scholars drawn to this field. We believe that such research can inform scholarship on education reform, generally, and find particular relevance in the on-the-ground goals and strategies of community-based organizations as they continue to engage the public in school reform, community by community.

We are also pleased that this work comes at a time when policy makers and civic organizations are turning increasingly to public engagement as a strategy for promoting democracy and revitalizing social institutions. Such was the case during the 2008 Obama campaign, in which public engagement was viewed not only as a strategy for winning the election, but also as a way to rebuild public life. Across the nation in “Camp Obamas,” Americans became actively engaged in politics—learning concrete ways to organize in their local communities. This citizen engagement and mobilization echoed the abolitionists, suffragettes, labor and civil rights movements, in which public engagement sought to ensure that the rights, benefits, and power of democracy are available to all. At best, such engagement produces structural adjustments, leaving the world no longer as it was. The power of an engaged and mobilized citizenry has changed the order of things.

The challenges facing our current public education system require such fundamental structural changes in our systems of public education. Changes of this magnitude mandate that communities and the public become engaged in ensuring the public benefit. This book represents one step toward understanding how previously marginalized community members come together to take public action in education and what happens when they do. Perhaps it can help marshal the force of an organized citizenry to advance the quality of public education for every child in America. We hope the readers of this volume, both scholars and activists, will find useful insights to continue their work in promoting public engagement in public education. At best, their work can also marshal America’s collective intellect and power to create and sustain effective public education and schools and, thereby, strengthen the future of our democracy.