

Preface

WHETHER LEFT OR RIGHT OF THE IDEOLOGICAL SPECTRUM, most observers tend to agree that public education works best when students, parents, and community members are engaged in improving the school system. There is however, a troubling aspect of public engagement in public education. Powerful and effective engagement is skewed by race, class, and immigrant status. While everyone wants high-quality education, some are able to advance this interest more effectively than others. Often, students and parents experience unequal opportunities for robust engagement. And frequently, school and elected officials respond to different constituencies differently. This problem of inequality in public engagement—what might be called the “engagement gap”—is critically important to the quality of education *and* civic life. We are interested in how it can be redressed. Hence, the essays in this volume consider how particular political and economic conditions create challenges and opportunities for previously marginalized students, parents, community members, and organizations to come together as powerful publics capable of improving schooling and revitalizing democracy.

What is public engagement? In our highly individualistic culture, it is important to differentiate public engagement from related terms such as *political participation*, *parent involvement*, or *consumer choice*. Public engagement cannot be reduced to individual acts such as voting, speaking with a teacher, or choosing a school. Public engagement emerges as parents, community members, and youth identify common educational problems and work together to address them. Public engagement both builds on and seeks to foster interdependence. Community members take public action as they recognize that the

fate of one's own household is tied to the fate of others. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." This is the reality from which our focus on public engagement stems. This is the reality by which we take stock of where we are and of the challenges we face.

How exactly should members of the public be engaged in education? Perhaps the response to this question will always remain a contested one, and perhaps in a healthy democracy it should be. But an informed debate about this issue would be well served by a better understanding of public engagement. In this book, we present and explore various forms of public engagement for public education (democratic governance, coproduction, community organizing, alliances, and social movement) and the likely consequences of these forms.

We hope this volume will invigorate scholarly inquiry about public engagement and public education. Over the years, a small but growing number of scholars have taken on this task. Education researchers are increasingly interested in the connection between expanding public engagement and systemic school reform. This interest has been fueled by a growing disenchantment with technical reform efforts that neglect the politics of education as well as recent changes in federal law that have focused new attention on parent involvement as a strategy for educational reform. Scholars in political science, sociology, and urban studies similarly have begun to focus attention on civic engagement and community organizing in education. This interest is fueled by a growing recognition that education is a key site of political mobilization and contestation by marginalized groups. It is our hope that researchers in education, sociology, anthropology, political science and related fields will read this book and begin to systematically explore the promises and challenges of public engagement for public education.

This book examines public engagement for public education through a number of academic disciplines. Our eclectic approach is deliberate. All the contributors to this volume have written extensively on education and inequality, and all of us bring a multidisciplinary orientation to the study of public engagement and public education. It is becoming more and more common for those who study urban education to draw on and build on the research developed not only by education scholars, but also by sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and political scientists. That the editors of this volume are trained in two distinct fields—political science and education—is

a testament to the growing recognition among scholars of urban schooling that the interdisciplinary approach brings strength and adds depth to the research enterprise.

This book would not have been written without the impetus of Wendy Puriefoy. Wendy is the president of the Public Education Network (PEN), a national association of local education funds and individuals working to advance public school reform in low-income communities across the United States. Believing in the centrality of community participation in equity educational reform, Wendy sought out research that could inform and deepen the practice of public engagement. She joined the Ford Foundation to convene a diverse group of academics with expertise and research interests in the area of public engagement and public education.

This book grew directly out of meetings of the Scholars Forum on public engagement at the Ford Foundation in 2005 and 2006. The contributors discussed plans for the chapters during a two-day retreat in Los Angeles in February 2007. We met again in October 2008 to present and critique each other's work. The regular meetings of the Scholar's Forum added coherency and depth to this edited collection. In addition to the contributors, several other members of the Scholars' Forum helped us think through some of the broader theoretical and practical implications of public engagement for public education. We would like to thank Meredith Honig, Clarence N. Stone, and Joseph Kahne.

We also thank the Ford Foundation for its early and ongoing support of the Scholars' Forum. Janice Petrovich of the Ford Foundation shared Wendy Puriefoy's goal of establishing a body of research that could inform policy makers and practitioners about public engagement and equity reform. She hosted the early meetings of the forum and contributed significantly to the groups' deliberations. In addition to Ford, several other foundations have supported this work, including the Schott Foundation, the Marguerite Casey Foundation, and the Spencer Foundation.

This book benefited from extraordinarily helpful comments from external reviewers who evaluated the manuscript for Stanford University Press. They provided insightful criticism and useful suggestions that enabled the contributors to improve the quality of the book. We also would like to thank the staff at Stanford University Press. Jennifer Hele, former acquisitions editor at SUP, was an early and enthusiastic supporter of our book idea. After Jennifer left, we were very fortunate to have the equally enthusiastic support of SUP's

Executive Editor Kate Wahl, who skillfully shepherded our book through the production process.

We would be remiss if we did not thank those at our home institutions who provided critical support. At Brown University, Brandi Nicole Hinnant, who earned her master's degree in urban education policy and is currently pursuing a PhD in educational studies at Emory University, provided splendid research assistance and helped with the logistics of several of our Scholars' Forum workshops. At UCLA, Martin Lipton contributed immeasurably to the project with his insightful readings of early drafts of the chapters. Carolyn Castelli organized the meeting of the Scholars' Forum at UCLA and later copyedited the draft manuscript, and she did all this with her usual mix of precision and good humor. The multitalented Jessie Castro offered critical technical help in the final stages of production.

We would like to thank our spouses, Ramona Burton and Sharla Fett, and our extended families for all their support. Their love, reassurance, and encouragement lift our spirits and enrich our work.

Finally, we thank the students, parents, and community members chronicled in this book who have joined together as publics to create better and more equitable schools. Their efforts deepen our understanding of educational reform and broaden our sense of democratic possibilities.