

"WILL IT BE ON THE TEST?"

**A CLOSER LOOK AT
HOW LEADERS AND
PARENTS THINK ABOUT
ACCOUNTABILITY IN
THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS**



A Report from Public Agenda and the Kettering Foundation

Author: Jean Johnson

Project Coordinator: Carolyn Farrow-Garland

Editor: Ilse Tebbetts

Copy Editor: Lisa Boone-Berry

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Jean Johnson is a senior fellow and senior advisor at Public Agenda. She is author of *You Can't Do It Alone: A Communications and Engagement Manual for School Leaders Committed to Reform* and writes regularly about public opinion and education.

Jeremy Hess at Public Agenda assisted in the preparation of this report.

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INTRODUCTION

“An ‘age of accountability’ is starting to replace an era of low expectations.”

—President George W. Bush
October 1999¹

“Our goal is accountability. It’s to provide teachers with the support they need, to be as effective as they can be, and to create a better environment for teachers and students alike.”

—President Barack Obama
July 2010²

OVER THE PAST 15 YEARS, federal, state, and local officials have pursued a broad range of reforms aimed at ensuring that the nation’s public school system is more accountable—that it delivers a rich, full education for children in communities across the country. But new research from the Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda suggests that there are important differences between the way most leaders and most parents define and think about accountability in public education.

Applause and caveats

As we will show in the following pages, most parents—and most Americans generally—applaud the goals of the accountability movement, and they support some of what it has accomplished. At the same time, many see it as profoundly incomplete because it

provides so few answers to problems they see as pivotal—too many irresponsible parents, too many unmotivated students, too little support from the community, and messages from society that undermine learning and education. The research also suggests that there may be a fundamental divide between leaders and parents on whether it is more important to preserve neighborhood public schools, even those that are struggling, or whether it is more important to give parents more choice.

“*Will It Be on the Test?*” is a summary of this research, which included focus groups held in Washington, DC; Detroit; New Orleans; Westchester County, New York; Birmingham; and Denver. Although this is a small-scale, qualitative study, its findings are buttressed by recent survey research from Public Agenda and others. (See page 27 for more on how the study was conducted.) This assessment, along with earlier work by Kettering and Public Agenda, reveals important areas of crosstalk and misunderstanding between leaders and parents and the public more broadly. The results here suggest that it might be useful to examine how teachers, administrators, employers, community leaders, and others think about accountability in public schools and the degree to which their definitions mesh with either leadership or parental views.

Even more important, “*Will It Be on the Test?*” raises important questions about the trajectory of education reform and whether the way we think and talk about “education” is too narrow. It is clear that nearly all parents

value what schools and teachers do and want them held accountable. But most also believe that families, communities, and the broader society also have responsibilities in educating children and that these groups should be held accountable too.

School reform and the accountability movement—as leaders typically see it

As almost anyone who works in K-12 education can attest, the past decade has been a period of sweeping change. Here are just a few of the accountability reforms that have become widespread in public schools:

- ✓ Expectations for what students should learn are higher.
- ✓ Students are routinely tested to ensure that they are learning.
- ✓ Increasingly, teachers, principals, and schools are evaluated based on whether tests show student progress.
- ✓ School systems are making more informa-

tion about test scores, graduation rates, and other performance indicators publicly available.

- ✓ In many communities, school leaders are closing or dramatically reorganizing low-performing schools.
- ✓ Many districts are turning to charter schools to replace traditional public schools. Charters are often viewed as more

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accountable, because if the school does not meet its academic goals, its charter can be revoked.

From a leadership perspective, these reforms propel the kind of change that will help more students succeed, especially low-income, minority students who are often trapped in brutally inadequate schools.

A reform movement on the brink?

Despite the honorable intent and inarguable impact of these reforms—and their broad adoption in nearly every school district nationwide—there are signs of unease among leaders about whether the accountability



movement has the public's full confidence and whether, by itself, it can achieve its goals. Mike Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation has asked whether reformers might "be watching the beginning of the end for the accountability movement."³ Petrilli was commenting on the debate over the federal role in ensuring accountability in public education, but opinion research among educators and the broader public suggests that his question has merit. Surveys of teachers and parents show concerns about too much testing and the value of testing.⁴ In many communities, parents, students, teachers, and residents have pushed back hard against proposals to close "persistently failing schools."

"*Will It Be on the Test?*" zeroes in on one explanation for the public's seeming discomfort. In focus groups with parents in cities across the country, we asked them to tell us in their own words what they mean by accountability and to give us their views on how well

school reform is working. One key assumption in this study is that it is vital to hear from parents in settings that allow them to use their own words to describe their thinking—just as leaders and reformers do when they speak and write about issues. Our goal was to delve beneath the opinions gathered through surveys—as useful as they are—to let people tell their own stories, provide their own examples, and recount their own experiences.

Our report contains these three sections:

- SECTION I: Areas of Agreement—Where Leaders and Parents See Eye-to-Eye on Accountability
- SECTION II: Areas of Tension—Where the Perspectives of Leaders and Parents Part Company
- SECTION III: Is It Possible to Blend the Competing Views? Some Questions for the Field

"*Will It Be on the Test?*" is an outgrowth of a 2011 Kettering Foundation/Public Agenda report that revealed "a potentially corrosive gap" between the way that leaders and the public define accountability more broadly—in federal, state, and local government and in the private sector. *Don't Count Us Out: How an Overreliance on Accountability Could Undermine the Public's Confidence in Schools, Business, Government, and More* describes how contrasting visions of accountability can feed public distrust of institutions rather than reducing it. One chief theme is that although accountability's emphasis on benchmarks and statistical measures of progress makes sense from a management perspective, it does little to address public frustration with institutions that seem impenetrable, uncaring, and unresponsive. That report is available at <http://www.publicagenda.org/dont-count-us-out>.



SECTION I:**AREAS OF AGREEMENT—
WHERE LEADERS AND
PARENTS SEE EYE-TO-EYE
ON ACCOUNTABILITY**

THE MOST IMPORTANT take-away from this research is that there are potentially troublesome gaps between the way leaders and typical parents think about accountability in public education—gaps that warrant more attention and research. But it is crucial to emphasize at the outset that the accountability movement responds to some genuine concerns among parents and the broader public and that some of the changes it has instituted are welcome.

Public schools should be better

There is little doubt that both leaders and the public believe the nation's schools need to improve. Both President Bush and President Obama made education reform a priority. States have passed new legislation, and school districts have adopted new policies designed to enhance student learning. Surveys repeatedly show that broad swaths of the American public are worried about the quality of the schools.

- ✓ Only 29 percent of Americans say they have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in public schools. According to Gallup tracking surveys, this “establishes a new low in public school confidence.”

This number is down from 33 percent in 2007-2008 and far below the 58 percent Gallup measured in the early 1970s.⁵

- ✓ Seven in ten likely voters say it is urgent to improve US high schools. Nearly as many say the same thing about elementary and middle schools.⁶
- ✓ Nearly 8 in 10 say they are “extremely” or “very concerned” about the number of students who don't graduate from high school.⁷
- ✓ Large majorities worry about high school graduates who aren't prepared for college-level work.⁸

Like Americans nationwide, parents in the focus groups for this project voiced tough criticism of public education's failures. In Detroit, one mother complained about low academic standards in local schools and what she saw as their unwillingness to help the students who need help most: “I mean they pass some of these kids . . . along. That's what bothers me the most because there are some kids that really need some help.” A father in New Orleans criticized local high schools: “When you go to college, most people do remedial courses the first two years because they're not prepared because high school sucks.”

Similar concerns surfaced in a related Public Agenda study, this time in focus groups with parents in low-performing school districts.⁹ In Washington, DC, a mother believed that the district was “not backing our students up. . . . They’re really not interested in our students.” 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

More recent surveys show continuing support for the basic goals of the accountability movement—that American children can and should learn at higher levels, that students from all backgrounds should have the chance to succeed, and that principals and teachers should be well trained and energetic in helping students learn.

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.”

And some accountability reforms make sense

Moreover, most parents and members of the broader public applaud some of what has changed in schools over the past 15 years, especially raising standards and graduation requirements. When Public Agenda assessed Americans’ views of the school reform move-

ment in 2003, there were pockets of criticism, but also an overwhelming consensus that schools should not return to the policies of the past. Just 2 percent of parents thought that the drive to raise standards in public schools should “be stopped and things should go back to the way they were.”¹⁰ Between 1994 and 2005, the percentage of parents identifying lack of emphasis on basics as a serious problem in local schools dropped from 28 percent to 20 percent.¹¹

More recent surveys show continuing support for the basic goals of the accountability movement—that American children can and should learn at higher levels, that students from all backgrounds should have the chance to succeed, and that principals and teachers should be well trained and energetic in helping students learn.¹² In fact, more than half of the parents (56 percent) say that enacting proposals to measure teacher effectiveness based on student performance should be a top priority for education reform.¹³

Nearly all the parents in the focus groups for this project were familiar with the main features of the accountability movement and supported many of them. One Westchester, New York, father liked the idea of evaluating teachers and holding them more accountable: “A student gets a grade and gets a point average. The teacher should get a grade and point average at the end of the season or the end of the school year [too].” A Washington, DC, parent pointed to the importance of rating schools based on dropout and truancy rates:

I think the school needs to create an environment that has low truancy. That would be an indicator that the kids like going there, and they’re learning and they’re doing well. If there’s a lot of truancy, you would think the opposite is true.

Many parents were also quick to cite examples of schools and educators that did not live up to their expectations. “I really think that schools also are part of the problem,” a Westchester mother said. “If my son is in sixth grade, and his teachers aren’t qualified, they’re not helping my son. I think schools have to be responsible for the teachers they’re bringing in.”

But despite parent and public support for the goals of the accountability movement, overall confidence in the American education system remains low. African American and Hispanic parents especially continue to voice higher levels of concerns about problems like

high dropout rates and low standards.¹⁴ More than 4 in 10 African American parents (43 percent) and a quarter of Hispanic parents (26 percent) 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.”¹⁵

What’s more, the vast majority of American parents say that when it comes to education, the United States is falling behind other countries (50 percent) or just keeping up (35 percent).¹⁶ The accountability movement has bolstered public confidence in some quarters, but in others, it still has far to go.

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SECTION II:

AREAS OF TENSION— WHERE THE PERSPECTIVES OF LEADERS AND PARENTS PART COMPANY

EVEN THOUGH MOST parents back the overall goals of the accountability movement, the research here (and in several related studies) shows that they also bring distinctive concerns and insights to the challenge of improving schools. In some cases, parents identify areas they believe need more attention (parent involvement and student behavior, for example). In others, they point to reforms that seem to them to be getting out of hand (testing, the drive to close poorly performing schools). In this latter area—the debate over closing schools and relying more on charter schools—most parents seem to bring a set of deep-seated values regarding neighborhoods and schools that some leaders either do not share or have not fully recognized or accounted for.

In the following pages, we offer a summary of six key areas where the views of typical parents seem to diverge from the accountability movement as it is generally framed by leadership.

1. As most parents see it, current discussions on accountability in public schools overlook one of the most crucial elements—the parents’ role. Schools and teachers can’t be successful, most parents say, unless students are cooperative and motivated and unless their parents instill and reinforce values of persistence and hard work. On this score, the parents say, parents need to be held accountable too.

Accountability is not a word most people use frequently in everyday life. As we reported in *Don’t Count Us Out* (our earlier report that examines how leaders and the public define accountability more broadly) discussions with typical citizens on accountability quickly shift into discussions about “responsibility” or being “trustworthy.” In the focus groups for this project, one woman defined accountability as “checks and balances.” Another man saw it as “just being honest and running the system, whatever system you have.”

But the most distinctive feature of the parents’ discussions about accountability in public education was the degree to which the conversation turned almost immediately to the subject of parents and their role in ensuring that children learn. The parents in the focus groups touched on issues like standards and testing and teacher evaluation to be sure, but their conversation was most forceful and engaged when it centered directly on parents’ responsibilities. This is where people really had something to say.

Moreover, the focal point of parents’ concerns was often the most basic responsibility of parenthood—raising children with the values and habits that will lead them to become responsible adults. The parents talked about helping with homework, participating in school activities, and advocating for better schools, and most saw

these as important parental roles, but their most intense worries revolved around what parents do or do not do to build their children's character—to ensure that their children work hard and behave in school.

“It's what [parents] instill in the child,” a father in Westchester told us in one of the focus groups. “The school could be horrible, but if the kid wants to learn, he's going to learn. It doesn't matter what school he's going to.” In Detroit, a mother said:

I think that so many people depend on the school to do everything. There's a lack of accountability . . . with parents. . . . [They] feel like “I'm just going to send my kid to school from 8:00 to 4:00 every day,” and let the teacher deal with it. You know what? The teacher has 30 other students.

Many of the parents, in fact, believed that one major challenge facing schools today is that they are being asked to take on roles that families and communities formerly shouldered. A mother in Westchester was typical:

I . . . think that families put a lot more on the schools being responsible for their kids. I think that sometimes the school is doing more disciplining and parenting for the kids than necessarily educating.

A father in New Orleans made a similar point: “The schools are expected to do more of what was done in other contexts, like in the church or in the family than in the past.”

As many of these parents described it, when parents don't take responsibility for their own children's behavior, it is extraordinarily difficult for schools and teachers to be effective. Many were outraged by the way some students behave in school, and they often pointed to contrasts between the attitudes of parents now compared to those of their own parents. As one 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 [other] kids up [to discipline them]. I'm forgetting they aren't mine.

A father in Westchester told us:

My parents never—no matter what horror was going on—[they] never went into the schools to say “You [the school] are not doing the right thing.” It was really the child [who] had to be accountable.

As many of these parents described it, when parents don't take responsibility for their own children's behavior, it is extraordinarily difficult for schools and teachers to be effective.

Many of the parents also worried that other parents sometimes didn't share their own values or sense of responsibility for raising their children well. A father in Detroit said:

If you look at kids today, the morals and stuff like that, I mean, there's a lot of parents that don't train their kids the same way [I would]. I don't want my kid associating with people or with kids that are not good associations.

A Westchester mother felt the same way:

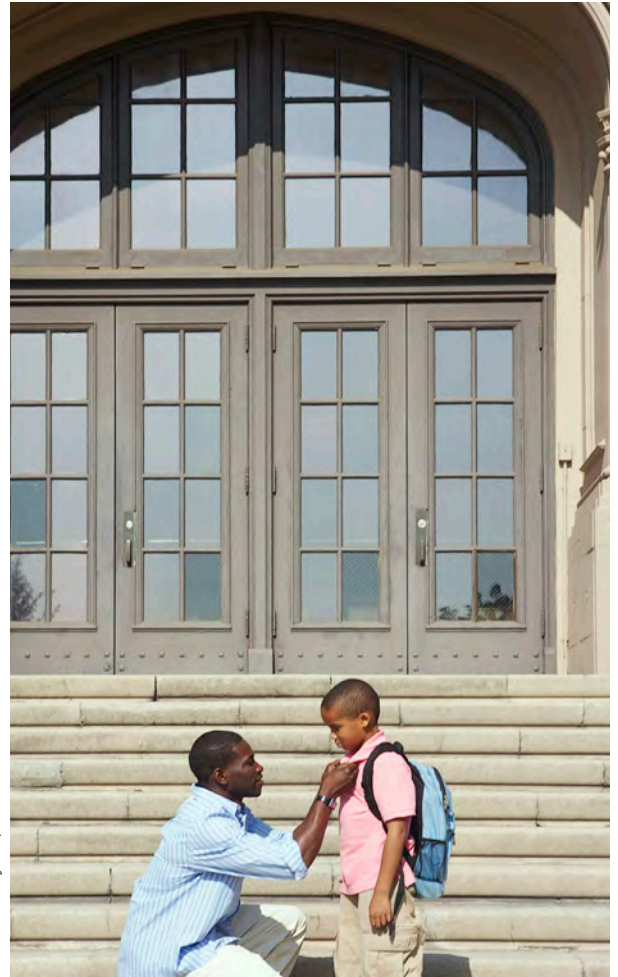
I personally don't like [my son] going over to friends' houses. . . . I'm personally not ready for him to be at other people's homes. As I said, they might not have the same values as I do.

The problem, as these parents saw it, is twofold. Parents have a hard time instilling good values in their own children because so many other parents are not responsible. And the schools struggle to educate children because so many parents don't teach their children the behavior basics that enable them to study and cooperate in school. A Westchester father questioned whether it was fair to blame teachers if parents aren't accepting their responsibilities as well:

If I felt my son was falling behind, he would be staying after school and getting extra help. Again, you're going to blame the teacher for the parent not pushing the kid. I'll say it over and over again, if my son wasn't doing good in school, he'd be staying there, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. There would be no PlayStation.

Many parents put the lion's share of the blame for education's failures squarely on the backs of irresponsible parents. But many also pointed to the broader society as a destructive force that either doesn't support or that undercuts what schools and families are trying to teach children.

National surveys show that these parents' concerns about lack of parent accountability and poor student behavior are not at all unusual. When the 2010 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa survey asked parents which is more important in helping children learn—the



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school or the parents—it wasn't even close: 76 percent of parents say parents; only 22 percent say the schools.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Seven in ten say that "students treating teachers with a lack of respect" is a serious or very serious problem.¹⁹ Majorities point to problems like drugs, fighting, and bullying; half say that cheating is a major issue. Public Agenda surveys of teachers and students show that large majorities of these groups also voice concerns about a climate of incivility and roughness in the nation's high schools.²⁰

Leaders in the education accountability movement have concentrated their attention on making sure that schools, teachers, and principals do their best to help students learn—clearly a worthy and indispensable mission. As a Detroit father put it:

It's not like parents have a teaching degree. I mean . . . there's got to be some sort of accountability for the schools. You can do your best to help have the things available for your kids, but at the same time, there's got to be decent schools.

But for the parents we spoke with, improving what schools and educators do is only one piece of the accountability puzzle. Most believe that if more parents don't do their part to teach their children to apply themselves in school, those children are not likely to succeed, nor are the nation's public schools likely to improve. These parents seem to be calling for a broader education reform agenda, one that tackles the problems of inattentive, irresponsible parenting and poor student behavior head on.

2. Many parents also indict the larger culture, depicting it as a force that continually undermines parents and teachers in their attempts to motivate children to work hard in school. Holding schools accountable is useful, these parents say, but don't expect them to be successful without broader social support.

Many parents put the lion's share of the blame for education's failures squarely on the backs of irresponsible parents. But many also pointed to the broader society as a destructive force that either doesn't support or that undercuts what schools and families

are trying to teach children. The subject came up repeatedly.

An inhospitable culture

"I blame a lot on the culture," a New Orleans father told us, "because we have created and tolerated the culture where the expectations are really different. We're willing to tolerate flippant back talk and disrespect in the home or in the school or whatever."

In Detroit, another father said this:

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.

And in Westchester, a mother talked about society's distorted ideas about what's admirable and what leads to success. "I think this country applauds professional sports people more than they do people who work their way through college and get a degree," she said. "Go be a professional football player, and you're going to earn these millions and millions and millions of dollars."

In some cases, the parents' critique of the broader society made them much more sympathetic to the fact that so many schools underperform. A Westchester father told us:

I absolutely 100 percent sympathize because there are absolutely school districts across the country that are struggling with a lot of societal issues that are dumped into the school. That's absolutely true.

Some participants pointed out that society doesn't provide much support for parents who are doing their best—either social support or moral support.

"Sometimes parents just aren't equipped," a Detroit mother said.

Maybe they have issues going on that they're not capable of doing what needs to be done. Maybe they have to work two or three jobs just to put food on the table. . . . If our society is aware [that] sometimes a parent—a single mom—does have to go out to work two or three jobs, [then] something should be done.

A father pointed to society's negative messages:

I think that the culture provides so much interference and lack of support—it makes it so much more difficult for [parents]. . . . Nowadays, you could be a parent and try your hardest, but you're battling up against a lot of forces that really have agendas that are very far from what you're doing.

“There's nothing like that anymore”

Many of the parents were convinced that things used to be better, that the country and communities have lost some of the shared values and shared experiences that supported families and schools. “When we grew up, it was like we had the neighborhood,” a

New Orleans father said.

We played with the neighborhood kids. Even now—I live in mid-city, but my girls go to school uptown, and there's nobody really in the neighborhood by the time I go pick them up from school. . . . There's nothing in the neighborhood like riding the bikes or anything like that. They have to do that on their own.

A Detroit mother made a similar comment:

I look back on when I grew up and how much my community played a big part in it. When my mom wasn't there, there was always somebody else to help me out. There's nothing like that anymore.

Again, national surveys of parents and the broader public bolster the messages coming from the focus groups. About half of parents (49 percent) believe that problems in local high schools stem mainly from “social problems and kids who misbehave” compared to just over a third (35 percent) who say the main problem is “low academic standards and outdated curricula.”²¹ And the vast majority of Americans are dissatisfied with the moral tenor of the country. Just 17 percent consider the “overall state of moral values in the country today” good or excellent versus 82 percent who say they are only fair or poor. About 7 in 10 Americans say the country's values are “getting worse.”²²

The point that emerges most clearly from these discussions is not that parents dismiss the accountability movement's argument that schools and educators can and should be more effective. Most parents clearly expect schools and teachers to do the best they can for the kids. The parents' question is whether it is reasonable to expect the schools to succeed without broader community and public support.



Many say that our society as a whole needs to do a better job of supporting families, making education a priority, and rebuilding a culture that respects learning, study, and hard work. “I think [the responsibility for children] is at all levels,” a Westchester father said. “I think the whole country’s responsible for what’s going on, all levels—the teachers, the parents.”

3. Most parents say that there are many factors to consider in judging whether schools are effective and fulfilling their mission. Standardized tests are useful, most say, but they are a limited measure of student learning—one that is now in danger of being overused.

Virtually all of the parents we spoke with knew that public schools have adopted reforms that rely on testing to raise standards, measure academic progress, and help judge whether schools and teachers are effective in helping students learn. Most Americans, including the parents in these focus groups, voice a general support for this aspect of reform. Some 7 in 10 members of the public favor “mandatory testing of students in public schools each year as a way to determine how well the school is doing educating students.”²³

But there are also clear signs from the discussions in these focus groups that many parents believe there is too much emphasis on testing and that this may be distorting teaching and learning. Many told us that test scores are only one measure among many other factors that should be weighed in judging schools, teachers, and students.

A New Orleans mother said: “Well, I think that [tests are] important, but I think it’s become—it’s been given too much weight, too much power.” A Westchester mother echoed this appraisal and worried that the focus on testing is pushing other important aspects of education aside. “I think there are too many [tests] right now,” she told us.

I think that a few are fine, but I find that it takes a lot of manpower to get those tests up and running. They teach . . . to the test, to pass the test. It’s a lot of energy. That’s why I was saying that I think that the schools aren’t necessarily doing as well as they could because they’re teaching to tests—where the kids are scoring high on them—but they’re not teaching them more creativity, more respect.

A New Orleans father also questioned what was being missed as educators put more attention on standardized testing: “From what I see as a parent . . . they make the tests so

Many parents believe there is too much emphasis on testing and that this may be distorting teaching and learning . . . that test scores are only one measure among many other factors that should be weighed in judging schools, teachers, and students.

high-stakes that you’re not teaching the kids their normal ABCs.”

Many parents made the point that, for them, test scores don’t tell the whole story—that they look to many other factors in judging a school. A father in Detroit put it this way:

Tests, to me—it doesn’t show how intelligent a person is. . . . To me, tests are not as important as: Is the principal available? Are they doing things to improve? Is your child coming home . . . engaged in what he’s doing in school? Is he learning? I think that’s a big deal more than test scores.

A Detroit mother asked:

What about the rest of the stuff going on in the school? . . . I mean it depends on what they came into. How are the books? How are the—how are the—what’s the class sizes? I mean there are so many other things other than test scores.

Some parents were even more skeptical of tests. A Westchester father dismissed them:

I say test scores . . . [don’t] mean anything. Go to every class. Look at the graduating class. Find out what schools their further education is [in]. . . . That’s how you determine if your school is doing [a good job].

A Detroit father distinguished between schools where students routinely score poorly on tests (which concerned him) and how tests are used to evaluate individual students.

I know that sometimes people don’t test well because of . . . anxiety, nerves, whatever, but when the whole school is still struggling and test scores are down. That’s something I think needs to be looked into a little bit more.

A number of parents still worried that school systems sometimes manipulate the testing process to make the district look better. A Westchester father made this comment:

[Schools will] say of course [that] they did exceptionally . . . because they weed out the kids that they know may only get an average score on that harder test, so they don’t even let them take it. The ones that are taking it are the extreme Mount Olympus gods’ crew that they know will get over 90, 95, 99 on the test.²⁴

These kinds of strategies may not count as outright cheating, but for many parents, they signify a similar bad faith and lack of integrity

among educators—in part, these doubts reflect the broad lack of trust in the public education system overall.

In this area, parents did not seem to be rejecting the leadership accountability model entirely, but many were clearly calling for testing to be put in context with other important elements of teaching and learning.

4. Most parents see local public schools as important community institutions and viscerally reject the idea that closing schools—even those that are persistently low-performing—is a good way to improve accountability in education.

In recent years, school leaders have moved to close some of the nation’s most troubled and deeply inadequate schools. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has called these schools “dropout factories,” pointing out that they often have dropout rates of 50, 60, or 70 percent. Leaders often see these schools as so dysfunctional that improving or transforming them seems all but hopeless. One telling statistic is that half of the nation’s high school dropouts come from just 12 percent of the nation’s schools.²⁵

Rather than being greeted as bold reformers who have the children’s best interests at heart, however, leaders planning school closures often encounter bitter and widespread backlash. Focus groups conducted for this project and other recent studies suggest the reason why. Most parents see schools as community institutions; closing them is seen as a defeat and a loss to the community; and most parents and members of the broader public simply do not understand why leaders don’t do more to “fix the schools we have” as opposed to closing them. These feelings emerged repeatedly and viscerally in our interviews with parents in districts where schools have been, or were slated to be, closed.

At the same time, many parents recognized that they need to step in, and step in forcefully, if their child is attending a troubled school or had been assigned to an ineffective teacher. In Detroit, one mother recounted her experiences when her children reached school age:

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.

Yet at the most basic level, the ideal for most parents seemed to be a strong public school in their own neighborhood—one with close ties to the community and easily accessible for both parent and child. Some pointed to neighborhood schools of the past as their model: “Schools were community-based,” a mother in New Orleans told us, “so everyone went to the same schools, so that’s why you knew everybody.”

One of our focus groups was in Detroit where dozens of public schools have been closed over the past few years due to declining enrollment and the city’s financial crisis, as well as poor performance. The city has opened up new charter schools, often organized by nationally respected charter educators with very impressive track records. And local leaders have invested considerable effort in educating parents about the changes, setting up fairs and other activities where parents can learn about the new choices. But the closures have still drawn considerable criticism in Detroit, and the sense of loss was still palpable.

“Detroit public schools represent our history . . . our legacy,” one Detroit mother told us.



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Most parents see schools as community institutions; closing them is seen as a defeat and a loss to the community; and most parents and members of the broader public simply do not understand why leaders don’t do more to “fix the schools we have” as opposed to closing them.

Detroit public schools are a part of Detroit. If Detroit public schools fail, Detroit fails. They look bad—we look bad. It’s big picture. We want to succeed.

Nor was this view confined to Detroit. In Washington, DC, one father voiced his fears about the increasing emphasis on charters and school choice—that there will be fewer parents left to advocate strongly for good public schools:

The best way to improve public schools, particularly in a place like DC, would be to abolish all the private schools. . . . [Then] these parents would be actively involved.

In a sense, this father's view is almost precisely the opposite of the leadership argument that charter schools will enhance competition and encourage public schools to improve.

In our Washington, DC, and Detroit groups, the idea of closing local schools also raised issues of race and class. Minority parents sometimes believed that schools in their neighborhoods were being closed when schools in more affluent, white communities remained open. For others, school-closing plans seemed to raise the specter of a broader, almost subversive, demolition of the traditional public school system in favor of one based on a system of vouchers and charters.

Public Agenda has interviewed community leaders and parent advocates on this issue in connection with a related project focusing specifically on the school-closing issue.²⁶

The spread of charter schools, along with the fact that many public school systems offer magnet and specialized schools, has added yet another dimension to the work of being an involved parent.

Here's how one of these activists described the impact on parents and the community:

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.

National polling suggests that most Americans share these parents' sense that closing a school should be an option of last resort. When the 2010 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa poll

asked Americans what should be done with a "persistently low-performing school in your community," 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 it with a new principal; 13 percent wanted to close the school and reopen it as a public charter school; and 11 percent opted for closing the school and sending students to other higher performing nearby schools.²⁷

5. For some leaders, allowing parents to choose which schools their children attend is another form of accountability—in effect the parents will vote with their feet. Parents appeared divided about whether more choice is beneficial—most take their responsibility to send their children to the best schools possible very seriously. Even so, there are warning signs that parents' views are evolving on this issue and that many would prefer a traditional neighborhood public school—just one that is very good.

While schools have been closed in communities across the country—for reasons of declining population and finances as well as poor performance—many districts are also opening new charter schools, developing more specialized public schools, or allowing parents to send their children to other public schools in other neighborhoods—often better performing ones. The point is that parents would no longer be forced to send their children to large, unsafe, disorderly, and academically dysfunctional schools.

The spread of charter schools, along with the fact that many public school systems offer magnet and specialized schools, has added yet another dimension to the work of being



an involved parent. Along with checking on homework and going to meetings with teachers, conscientious parents need to familiarize themselves with their school choices and follow through to ensure that their children attend the school that fits them best.

Surveys suggest that most parents (and the public in general) like the idea of more choice in education, and Public Agenda’s qualitative research with parents in low-performing districts suggest that many are familiar with and admiring of what charter schools do. Nearly 6 in 10 parents say parents should send their child to a better school outside the neighborhood even if it means significant travel, with nearly 4 in 10 African American parents agreeing “strongly” with this statement—a higher percentage than any other group.²⁸ About a quarter (25 percent) of parents say that having more charter schools would be a very effective way to get parents more involved, with another 26 percent saying it would be somewhat effective.²⁹

At the same time, however, having more charters was not seen as the best way to get more parents more involved; more meetings with teachers and more information about what children should learn were seen as more

effective.³⁰ What’s more, only 36 percent of parents say they know a lot about the options they have for sending their children to other schools, either charters or other public schools.³¹

There may be a warning sign beneath these numbers—one that suggests that the country needs to have a clearer and more explicit discussion of whether the goal is to have strong neighborhood schools everywhere or whether the goal is to give parents more choices about their children’s schools.

In the focus groups, many parents seem to see sending their children to better schools elsewhere as a fallback solution, rather than their first choice. The better solution, many of them seem to say, would be to improve the quality of the neighborhood public schools in their own communities. In commenting on the pluses of charters, for example, some parents asked why these same ideas and policies couldn’t be adopted in traditional public schools. In effect, the leadership accountability strategy of enlisting parents as choosers to heighten accountability seems to run headlong into another major goal most parents endorse—having a top-quality *neighborhood* public school.

A father in Detroit said he wasn’t opposed to the charter schools, but he still wanted a strong and flourishing system of local public schools:

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.



As noted earlier, parents typically see their overriding responsibility as raising their children with the strong values and habits of behavior that will help them lead responsible, successful lives. For most parents, this aspect of accountability easily trumps all others. But parents also recognize that they have other important responsibilities with regard to their children's education.

Many parents talked about the importance of being involved in their own child's school. A Westchester mother, for example, was critical of parents who shirk this responsibility. Too many parents, she told us,

don't show up to PTA meetings.
They don't come to the one-on-one
[meetings] with the teachers. They
just don't participate.

The father of a teenager interviewed in Washington, DC, also talked about how crucial this form of parent involvement can be:

I think it depends on the parent participation. . . . Some schools you have a lot of parents . . . in the PTA. They come to the school. They advocate for the school regularly.

The research here, along with previous work by both the Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda strongly suggests that most Americans see public schools as having a dual purpose. They are places where children learn needed academic skills, but they are also centers and symbols of the community. Even in communities with low-performing schools, residents often see "their" local public school as an emblem of the community itself, and having more choices does not heal the palpable sense of loss they feel when that school is gone.

6. Most parents welcome the trend of making more information about schools available to the public. But good communications means more than transparency and disclosure for most parents. It means being confident that a principal or teacher will return your calls and treat your concerns and questions with genuine care. Having more information about schools is helpful, most parents say, but it doesn't mean that the lines of communication are open.

The *New York Times* is just one of dozens of newspapers across the country that reports statistical information about schools and school performance available to its readership. Here's how the editors describe their reasoning:

In this era of accountability, education statistics are increasingly important, and education departments have responded by publishing reams of data about schools. This site will help you put the numbers into context. For every school in New York, you'll find a complete summary of demographics and student performance over the past decade. The site will be updated regularly as new data becomes available.³²

In focus groups for this and other projects, most parents and members of the public seem to support the general concept—that more information is better and that it’s an important component of accountability. But this research also suggests two crucial caveats:

1. Given the existing low levels of trust in many school districts, many parents are very skeptical about the information that is released.
2. For most parents, the essence of good communications is not having more facts at hand. It’s being confident that their concerns will be listened to and that there will be two-way, not just one-way, communications between parents and educators.

In focus group after focus group, people’s skepticism and confusion about “information from the schools” leapt out. As discussed earlier, many parents voice concerns about the usefulness and reliability of test score data. Some questioned whether school districts were being straightforward and frank in reporting test scores or whether the information was being “spun” to make the schools look better. But parents also voiced doubts about what some of the information really means. Some admitted they were confused. “I mean how do they deem [a teacher as bad]?” a Washington, DC, mother said.

That’s what I’m trying to figure out.
That part I never understood . . . how
[Michelle Rhee] deemed [teachers]
bad.

A Detroit father who had been active in his schools voiced similar doubts:

The education curriculum, which
[myself and fellow parents] have been
addressing with Robert Bobb [the
Emergency Financial Manager for
the Detroit Public Schools] 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.

An equally serious divide revolves around how parents define good communications. Getting more data—and having more transparent policies regarding school metrics—may be helpful, but what leaps out in direct

Getting more data—and having more transparent policies regarding school metrics—may be helpful, but what leaps out in direct conversations with parents is their hunger for two-way communications and for a personal relationship with the educators in their schools.

conversations with parents is their hunger for two-way communications and for a personal relationship with the educators in their schools. A Westchester father said this:

Some schools will say we reach out plenty. [They] send a lot of e-mails. [They] send a lot of newsletters. A lot of that is one-way communication. I think there’s dialogue which is a different form of reaching out. . . . I think they need to reach out [and] talk to parents about—not just we don’t have enough money—but here’s what our goals are.

Surveys of parents suggest that they see some forms of information as far more useful and relevant than others. Nearly 6 in 10 parents (58 percent) say that “knowing more about what benchmarks and skills your child should be mastering” every year would be

a very effective way to improve parental involvement. Even more parents (67 percent) believed that personal conversations with teachers four times a year would be very effective. In contrast, only 34 percent thought that having a “public ranking of teachers” according to the test scores of their students would be very effective, with another 35 percent saying it would be “somewhat effective.”³³

The more important point is that communication is a two-way street for most parents—they want to be heard and responded to. Just getting more information is not the same thing. Some parents went so far as to name this as job number one for principals. An Albuquerque woman said this:

If you call and leave a message for them, and they never call back, that right there is a clue to you. They should be calling people back. . . . If you have to make a phone call to the principal, there’s an issue, so you should get a phone call back from the principal—not the assistant principal, not the aide, the principal.

Some of the parents were cynical about their school districts’ willingness to consider parents’ views. A Denver mother said:

[They] pretend to listen. They say what you want to hear.

Yet, based on the research for this project and others, one-way communications and lack of responsiveness are commonplace especially in larger schools and districts. Even in circumstances where tact and respectfulness would seem to be paramount—such as when the district has to close a school—parents commonly reported communications that seem cavalier at best, and bordering on hurtful at worst. Here is how a parent activist recently interviewed by Public Agenda

got the news that her child’s school would be closed, at least as she remembered it:

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 how you don’t talk to families if you want them to stay.

Don’t Count Us Out, the Kettering/ Public Agenda report that explored the issue of accountability more broadly, revealed a similar conviction among the public. It is probably a step forward that institutions in different sectors are becoming more transparent and forthcoming with statistical data about their performance. And if they set up websites that enable the public to sort through all this information—and it is clear and accessible—even better. But that is not what people mean by being responsive to the public or having good communications. What people are looking for is knowing that someone will speak to them, listen to them, and treat them as someone worthy of consideration and respect.



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SECTION III:

IS IT POSSIBLE TO BLEND THE COMPETING VIEWS? SOME QUESTIONS FOR THE FIELD

One of the accountability movement's most compelling themes over the past 10 to 15 years has been its commitment to the idea that effective schools and teachers can help all children learn, even those from poor communities or troubled family backgrounds. The accountability movement puts the onus for student success on educators. For their part, most Americans readily accept the premise that all children can learn. In fact, 75 percent say that "given enough help and attention, just about all kids can learn and succeed in school."³⁴

But one of the most important messages from this research on how parents think about accountability is that, most simply, they do not believe schools can do it alone. Most of the parents interviewed for this project were sympathetic to the challenges schools and teachers face. In the focus groups, parents repeatedly raised questions about whether it is reasonable to expect educators to shoulder the entire responsibility for children's learning—especially when schools have limited resources, when so many students come to school with learning and behavior problems, and when society itself seems to discount the importance of education and working hard in school.

In effect, the nation seems to be having two parallel discussions about accountability in public education. Among leaders, the

emphasis is on what schools and educators need to do better and what should happen to teachers and principals when they fail to help students learn needed academic skills. Among parents, discussions about accountability tend to shift quickly into discussions about student behavior and motivation and about parents' responsibility for instilling positive values and habits in this regard. When children fail to learn, a New Orleans father told us:

I blame the society more than the individual teachers [for not preparing kids] because we have a culture that doesn't honor hard work, reading, exercise, and all of those things [that] I think interact.

Parents are relatively detached from discussions of "common core standards" or how to change incentives and compensation policies for teachers and principals. There is considerably more interest in talking about what parents can do to support their child's education and what schools and communities can do to ensure that more families take their own responsibility for their children's learning seriously.

Compared to most education reformers, typical parents are more concerned about the impact of poor neighborhoods and negative messages from the larger society. These obstacles can be surmounted, most parents seem to believe, but they are formidable forces



that have an undeniable affect on whether children succeed in school. They also have an impact on whether schools and teachers can do their jobs. This sense that “outside” factors influence children’s ability to thrive in school may partly explain the parents’ lukewarm response to metrics. Test scores matter, most parents told us, but they also tell a limited, piecemeal story. At the end of the day, parents typically believe that a child’s ability to learn and thrive in school depends on more than what the teacher does in the classroom.

Most of the parents we interviewed also had a specific vision of the school’s role in the community and its relationship with parents. To most, a school is a community institution—not just a building where academic skills are taught. And for most, the relationship between families and the school should be a more personal and interactive one—not just a compact between customer and service provider—but a deeper connection involving shared responsibility for bringing up the community’s children and bringing the community itself together.

The need for informed consent

One major implication of the research here is that the country—and individual

states and communities—need to have a clear, more transparent discussion about the importance of neighborhood public schools versus the promise of improving education by developing more charter schools and offering more school choice. There are persuasive arguments in favor of giving parents more choice, and there are certainly compelling moral reasons to end the policy of tolerating dimly ineffective neighborhood schools that have failed students for decades. Parents and the general public would be well advised to consider and weigh them, especially in light of the accomplishments of the best charter schools.

But this would be a fundamental change in the way most Americans think about public education, one that warrants a clear and unambiguous conversation. In most cases so far, the move to school choice has materialized as a by-product of the push for “more accountability in public education.” Given the strength of people’s feelings about local public schools, that is a recipe for creating public distrust, not for enhancing it.

The research also suggests at least three areas where dialogue between parents and local educators—and among national leaders, the reform community, and the broader public for that matter—could be fruitful.

1. **What should we do when some parents don’t take the responsibility for teaching their children to behave and work hard in school?** Most of the parents we spoke to worried that some parents are not teaching their children the values of self-control, perseverance, curiosity, cooperation, and respectfulness that underlie success in school. Even though this may be a relatively small number of parents, the impact can be wide-ranging, according to many in our focus groups. Children who don’t have these

basic character traits and life skills may not benefit from school themselves, and they may be disruptive and unmotivated. They can often be a distraction in the classroom and the school, and a handful are even dangerous. Most Americans do not believe it is fair to let children—or their classmates and schools—suffer the consequences when some parents fail their children so utterly. The question is what can and should be done?

2. **Do we have to close failing schools, and if we don't, what can we really do to turn them around?** The backlash to closing schools is obvious in cities and school districts nationwide. Based on this research, the strategy of closing these deeply inadequate schools and giving parents the choice to send their children to other schools is sharply at odds with what most parents and other Americans expect and want. But tolerating the status quo in these circumstances is equally unacceptable. Are there other approaches? What role should communities and parents play in deciding how to move forward?
3. **How can we help parents raise responsible children in today's society, when there are so many mixed messages in the media and the broader culture?** Surveys of parents by Public Agenda suggest that many of them, despite their good intentions, aren't doing as well as they would like at helping their own children learn in school and grow into responsible adults. While 8 in 10 parents say that it is “absolutely essential” to teach their children to “always do their best in school,” just half of parents say they have succeeded in helping their own child do this. Similarly, more than 8 in 10 parents say it is absolutely essential to teach their children

to have “self-control and self-discipline,” but just over a third (34 percent) believe they have succeeded in this regard with their own child.³⁵ And many believe that they face an uphill battle trying to raise children in what they see as a toxic culture—one that glamorizes materialism and self-indulgence. Many parents seem to be looking for answers and looking for allies. How can educators, parents, and other adults work together to instill the values that will help children flourish in school and beyond?

Perhaps most unsettling is that there seems to be so little opportunity for parents, teachers, students, and others outside the leadership structure to bring their alternative ideas to the fore. So far, these strikingly different ideas about what accountability means have remained hidden and virtually unacknowledged.

“*Will It Be on the Test?*” reveals that there are multiple definitions of what accountability means and how it should play out. In some areas, these contrasting ideas could be meshed in ways that might ultimately lead to stronger schools and enhanced student learning. In others, the contending definitions seem to be on a collision course.

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have remained hidden and virtually unacknowledged.

The ultimate message from this research is that it is time to talk frankly and seriously about these contending definitions, and to do that, we'll need to open up conversations where leaders, reformers, parents, teachers, students, principals, and others exchange ideas on what children and schools need to improve and what each group should be

responsible for. As one father in Westchester told us:

[The work of helping children succeed in school] should be in partnership. I think that's the bottom line problem. We've ended up in a place where we're adversaries now, instead of . . . more in partnership with each other.

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What's Trust Got to Do with It? A Communications and Engagement Guide for School Leaders Tackling the Problem of Persistently Failing Schools (Public Agenda, 2011). <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/whats-trust-got-to-do-with-it>.

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Don't Count Us Out: How an Overreliance on Accountability Could Undermine the Public's Confidence in Schools, Business, Government, and More (Public Agenda for the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 2011). <http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/dont-count-us-out.pdf>.

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH

BOTH THE KETTERING FOUNDATION AND PUBLIC AGENDA have conducted dozens of studies exploring the public's role in public education, and both organizations have worked to enhance dialogue between decision makers on the one hand and parents and community members on the other. This analysis draws on several sources of information:

- A review of the large storehouse of survey data on parents' and principals' views on public education over the past 15 years.
- A review of the extensive writings and statements of leaders and reformers on accountability in public education over the same period.
- Focus groups conducted in Washington, DC; Detroit; New Orleans; Westchester County, New York; Birmingham; and Denver with parents of children currently in public schools and with public school principals, focusing specifically on definitions of, and assumptions about, accountability.
- A review of previous Kettering and Public Agenda research on K-12 education conducted over the past few years (see **Related Publications**).

ABOUT THE CHARLES F. KETTERING FOUNDATION

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, "what does it take to make democracy work as it should?" Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions.

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PUBLIC AGENDA, an innovative public opinion research and public engagement organization, works to strengthen our democracy's capacity to tackle tough public policy issues. Nonpartisan and nonprofit, Public Agenda was founded by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in 1975. It helps communities and the nation solve tough problems through research that illuminates people's views and values, and engagement that gets people talking, learning from each other, and working together on solutions.



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*Kettering
Foundation*

www.kettering.org

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799; (937) 434-7300; (800) 221-3657

444 North Capitol Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001; (202) 393-4478

6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016; (212) 686-7016