

## ACHIEVING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Kathleen Knight Abowitz

Department of Educational Leadership  
Miami University

---

**ABSTRACT.** Public schools are functionally provided through structural arrangements such as government funding, but public schools are achieved in substance, in part, through local governance. In this essay, Kathleen Knight Abowitz explains the bifocal nature of achieving public schools; that is, that schools are both subject to the unitary Public compact of constitutional principles as well as to the more local engagements with multiple publics. Knight Abowitz sketches this bifocal nature, exploring both the unitary ideal and its parameters, as well as the less understood forms of multiple, organic publics that come into being in response to localized problems in schools or districts. These publics often fail to realize their potential in the development of increased capacity for enhanced teaching and learning. The essay ultimately points to a practical application: that educational leadership of all types, and with some very specific kinds of habits and skills, is needed to help achieve public schools.

The modifier “public” on the institution of public school refers in part to how such schools should be governed. Broadly stated, “the people” must be authentically present in the governance of public schooling, but what this could precisely mean is the topic of this essay. Contemporary U.S. schools typically engage their citizens politically through the machinery of public relations, often adopting a salesperson’s pose for managing school image in the eyes of voters and taxpayers. In turn, when citizens are engaged with their schools, it is frequently through the stance of customer: a person who, in exchange for tax money, deserves the educational product for which they paid. When citizens participate politically in school governance, it is usually through aggregate means: voting for representatives who are to pass laws and make school policy in the perceived collective interest at the federal, state, and local levels. Given the rates of voting in state and local elections, and the proportionality of representatives to voters, citizens remain politically distanced from the governance of their public schools. The trends toward increased federal and state involvement in school governance have exacerbated this distance.<sup>1</sup>

The public idea, suggestive of accountability to the *demos* of democratic governance, has a dual and paradoxical meaning. The idea and name of a public institution calls upon notions of an inclusive sphere of individuals bearing rights and responsibilities, in which political decisions are guided by constitutional principles. “The people,” in this notion of the public, have little actual political agency in real terms, but much symbolic power through the derivation of constitutional principles used to make school governance decisions. These principles are based in values of individual liberty, equality of opportunity, and participatory governance.

---

1. Robert Franciosi writes that in the twentieth century, “education reform has consistently been accompanied by a relentless centripetal force, as each new plan places greater power in higher authority levels: from district to town, town to state, and state to the federal government.” See Robert J. Franciosi, *The Rise and Fall of American Public Schools: The Political Economy of Public Education in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2004), 133.

These values, symbolic of constitutional commitments in a nation-state, achieve political power when used to guide policymaking at all levels, as well as leadership and decision making in local schools. This is a typical interpretation of the label "public" when used to describe public schooling. It is the public with a capital P, the most dominant meaning of the term.

Referencing a larger, symbolically inclusive Public sphere of liberal rights and responsibilities, the constitutional principles provide an important means for public schools to build and earn political legitimacy. Political legitimacy is a political good currently in short supply for public schools, and one that cannot be bought or sold through the tools of public relations. As Harry Brighouse writes, "legitimizing consent must be earned, not manufactured."<sup>2</sup>

Yet there is a second, often forgotten but essential meaning of the public idea as it relates to schooling. Contrasting with a large-scale Public sphere of rights-bearing individuals, constitutional principles and broad-based policy directives in the name of Public interests are the more organic and episodic eruptions of public will and social movement that form in response to shared problems or problematic situations. There is a universal Public within the context of nation-state borders, but there are also multiple publics. This would be true in any large social entity, but it is especially true in a society like the United States in the twenty-first century. A society inhabited by diverse ideologies, religions, ethnicities, and nationalities, and characterized by pernicious inequality of educational resources and outcomes, U.S. political society noisily brims with multiple, episodic, and chaotic eruptions of "the people":

The authoritative "people" that haunts our political discourse is indeed best thought of neither as a formally organized corporate body nor as an atomistic collection of individuals, but instead as an occasional mobilization through which separate individuals are temporarily welded into a body able to exercise political authority.<sup>3</sup>

"The people," in the case of school politics, mobilize around particular problems related to young people and their schools, and are best understood not simply as *the* Public but as potentially multiple publics. These mobilizations, when they mature beyond embryonic formations, can come to understand their shared educational problems and potential solutions through political practices and shared work. These multiple publics also need to be engaged in the governance of schools; their energies and motivations harnessed, when possible, to build greater capacities for teaching and learning in schools. But such harnessing is not necessarily inevitable nor is it even considered desirable by all policymakers and school leaders. Not

---

2. Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (New York: Routledge), 126.

3. Margaret Canovan, "The People," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, ed. John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 356–357.

all political associations of citizens can be considered “publics,” as some do not have public aims or motives, as I discuss later in the essay. But for those who would meet such motivational criterion, there are a number of practical hurdles to the maturation of a public association related to a school issue. Challenges to communication and reasoned deliberation in our sound-bite, sensationalist society abound. Moreover, publics are unequal in status and influence; public associations also have access to widely divergent resources and capital to use in their own development and interests. For these and other reasons, most publics, as John Dewey noted, do not move beyond initial, embryonic formative stages.<sup>4</sup>

To achieve public schools, educational and civic leaders of all types ought to become more adept at seeing the dual nature of the public and at harnessing the potential of multiple publics through specific skills and habits. I argue here for a bifocal understanding of the public idea as it relates to schooling, and assert that educational leaders can help *achieve* publics for public schools — that public schools are, in effect, *more* than the sum of their parts, more than merely schools run with tax dollars and elected school boards.<sup>5</sup>

Public schools are achieved when the constitutional principles and broad policy dictates of the capital-P Public sphere are joined with a broader understanding of school governance, particularly at the more local levels: the development and channeling of the political authority created by the mobilization of actual publics. Rights-bearing individuals as well as federal-state education policy constitute the content and norms of the universal Public, but public life is simultaneously inhabited by radical pluralism, and schools cannot earn political legitimacy by avoiding or managing this pluralism through a simplistic, technical following of “public” rules given by the Constitution or federal mandates, nor through playing disingenuous public relations games. Public schools are achievements, moments when citizens focusing on the problems of school or youth can build forms of communication, leadership, and political influence in order to enhance the capacities of educators in public schools.<sup>6</sup>

---

4. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), chap. 4.

5. As Dewey wrote in 1938, “We have a great and precious heritage from the past, but to be realized, to be translated from an idea and an emotion, this tradition has to be embodied by active effort in the social relations which we as human beings bear to each other under present social conditions. It is because the conditions of life change, that the problem of maintaining a democracy becomes new, and the burden that is put upon the school, upon the educational system is not that of stating merely the ideas of the men who made this country, their hopes and their intentions, but of teaching what a democratic society means under existing conditions.” John Dewey, “Democracy and Education in the World of Today,” in *1938–1939: Essays, Experience and Education, Freedom and Culture, and Theory of Valuation*, vol. 13 of *The Collected Works of John Dewey: The Electronic Edition*, ed. Larry A. Hickman (Charlottesville, Virginia: Intalex, 1996), 299.

6. The characterization of publics as achievements is an idea originally explicated in John Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problems*, but the specific formulation of it presented here comes from Dennis Shirley: “Perhaps the ‘public realm’ is not a given, but rather a social and political achievement.” See Dennis Shirley, “Community Organizing for Educational Change: Past Illusions, Future Prospects,” in *The Future of Educational Change: International Perspectives*, ed. Ciaran Sugrue (New York: Routledge, 2008), 89.

In this essay, I explain the bifocal nature of achieving public schools; that is, that school leaders are both subject to the unitary Public compact of constitutional principles as well as to the often more local engagements with the multiple publics that arise in relation to shared educational problems.<sup>7</sup> I first turn to features of the unitary Public and the constitutional principles that help guide public school leaders (a broad term meant here to be inclusive of formal, informal, administrative, teacher, parent, and civic leaders associated with schools). These principles help us understand how public schools come to enjoy political legitimacy in a democratic state, an important and diminishing intangible good for public schools today. This reading of the Public is largely a theoretical product of political liberalism. In the second part of the essay, I turn to the idea of publics, or eruptions of political identification and collective interest around shared social problems. Derived from readings of pragmatist and poststructural political theory, this conception presents the idea that publics emerge frequently in the political life of schools but usually fail to realize their potential in the development of legitimacy or in the development of increased capacity for enhanced teaching and learning in schools. The overall argument ultimately points to a practical application, one I sketch in the third section: educational leadership of all types, and with some very specific kinds of habits and skills, is needed to help achieve public schools.

#### THE UNITARY PUBLIC: PRINCIPLES OF GOVERNANCE IN A LIBERAL-DEMOCRATIC STATE

Stable governments and their institutions require citizens who respect and can function within the established political order. If government is to be stable without being repressive, it must be legitimate in the eyes of its citizens. If it is to be seen as legitimate without manipulating citizens to accept an unjust regime, citizens must see it as legitimate because it meets appropriate normative criteria of legitimacy.<sup>8</sup>

Kenneth Strike's description of the necessary conditions for stable governments points out two kinds of criteria that schools must achieve in the eyes of citizens. The first are criteria for properly meeting basic aims and purposes, in which institutions "should aim at the good of those they serve." The second set of criteria concerns how to meet these purposes specifically under conditions of a liberal-democratic form of governance.<sup>9</sup>

The first set of legitimacy criteria is based in meeting the institution's basic goals and objectives. As defined by government legislation, discipline-based content standards, local school boards, as well as numerous popular and scholarly perspectives, these goals and purposes are far from stable, and they are not the product of complete consensus but instead represent more or less the mainstream

---

7. Chris Higgins suggested the helpful "bifocal" metaphor here.

8. Kenneth A. Strike, "Liberty, Democracy, and Community: Legitimacy in Public Education," in *American Educational Governance on Trial: Change and Challenges*, part 1 of the *102nd Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, ed. William Lowe Boyd and Debra Miretzky (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 37.

9. *Ibid.*, 38.

consensus about content expectations. These goals are broadly concerned with literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking; with knowledge of U.S. and world history, science, current affairs, government, geography, mathematics, economics, technology, health/safety, and the arts. These goals also include and reflect some generally shared public views on behavioral and moral standards for youth. The actual curriculum and conduct standards of any school or district should be the product of ongoing argument, reflective of a combination of educator's judgments, local politics, and citizens' desires, as well as state, national, and international trends. A school's legitimacy can be partially judged by how well it meets these educational standards.

The second kind of legitimacy criteria derives from the goal of *political legitimacy*. While the first criteria are appropriate for school organizations in many different kinds of political societies — totalitarian, socialist, or communist — a democratic society has constitutional and civic requirements that impose additional legitimacy standards for its state-sponsored schools. Strike lists the following principles of political legitimacy for public schools: (1) fair participation — citizens must be able to participate in the shared governance of the school; (2) liberty and pluralism — public schools should respect constitutional freedoms of religion, free association, speech, and the press, and they must respect cultural, religious, and human diversity; (3) equal opportunity — equal protection of the laws and a level playing field for all students and families; (4) political education — producing good citizens who can function well in a liberal-democratic society; and (5) professionalism — ensuring that decisions that require expertise are made by those with appropriate expert knowledge and authority.<sup>10</sup>

When used to shape decisions and policies in public schools, these principles help educators build political legitimacy by reflecting the important values for education found in a constitutional and liberal-democratic political system. The U.S. Constitution is the symbolic expression of a historical attempt to build an inclusive, egalitarian political society comprised of individuals who are constructed as rights-bearing citizens. It is a human-created, evolving document that constitutes the political agency of the universal Public of the United States (“universal” meaning all those adult members of the political society of the nation-state). The principles of liberty and equal opportunity reflect ideas within the political tradition of liberalism, which prioritizes expansion of individual rights to expression within a context of inclusive, egalitarian political membership. The principles of fair participation in governance and political education for students reflect the civic republican strain of democracy that shaped the Enlightenment-inspired Constitution in accord with the value of popular sovereignty. The principle of political education underscores this same value with the belief that citizens in each generation must be able to understand their duties and rights, and use them

---

10. *Ibid.*, 40–41. Strike uses the term “political socialization” in principle 4, but I prefer “political education” as it describes the more conscious development of knowledge and capacities necessary for critical citizenship.

to enact liberal-democratic ideals in every age. The principle of professionalism balances the authority of citizens over schooling with the expertise wielded by educators, whose understanding of subject matter, human growth and development, and pedagogy should provide their views with a special status in the making of educational policy and decisions.

These principles help educational leaders make policy and decisions at all levels, and they are particularly important to help guide leaders in districts and school buildings.<sup>11</sup> Yet these principles are inadequate, in and of themselves, for educational leaders seeking to understand their roles and duties within the political and ethical terrain of public school governance. These principles, symbolizing the unitary Public and the legal rights of individual citizens, fail to fully acknowledge what is required for popular sovereignty. They account for citizens as bearers of individual rights, but they fail to fully account for publics as pluralistic, shifting mobilizations of political will formation and agency. The unitary Public — based in the loose consensus of constitutional norms and values from which Strike's five principles are derived — exists alongside the political field of multiple, conflicting, and evolving public formations:

Democratic politics does not consist in the moment when a fully constituted people exercises its rule. The moment of rule is indissociable from the very struggle about the definition of the people, about the constitution of its identity ... through multiple and competing forms of *identifications*.<sup>12</sup>

#### PUBLICS AND SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

The vision of school politics and governance derived from the constitutional, liberal-democratic version of political theory cannot contain the rich and difficult pluralism of contemporary political life, nor can it fully accommodate the constitutional promise of popular sovereignty. As radical pluralists emphasize, pluralism is not a mistake, nor a sickness of a declining nation-state. The circus that is public life is a condition of liberal-democratic nation-states that, despite moderations in volume, tone, and diversity of acts, is a sign of political life. "In a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism."<sup>13</sup>

Democracy, in this sense, is a paradoxical narrative for school governance. Governing schools according to liberal-democratic ideals requires understanding and navigating this paradox with a complex set of habits and skills. It means negotiating decision making bifocally: with a constitutionally constructed set of principles, marking symbolic agreement among individuals and their government-run schools, alongside ubiquitous political contests and engagements that call

---

11. Kenneth A. Strike provides a detailed argument for this position in his book *Ethical Leadership in Schools: Creating Community in an Environment of Accountability* (Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin, 2007).

12. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2000), 56 (emphasis in original).

13. *Ibid.*, 34. The discussion of democracy as paradox that follows is derived from a reading of this text.

into question the who, what, how, and why of the situational application of these principles for schools and districts. The liberal-democratic constitutional principles guide and are guided by the political contentions — their relevant ordering, the actual content of their abstract formulations, and their real-world application within the diverse educational places and regions within the nation-state itself.

The difficult and sometimes contentious terrain of school politics requires the radical pluralist vision so that crucial details and identities can be expressed, challenged, and defined in relation to specific contexts and on-the-ground conditions in schools and localities. In these expressions and definitions, popular sovereignty is exercised and helps to inform the broad direction and content of public schooling. This vision also moves beyond an easy reliance on individual citizens as the sole political agents, allowing for political formations and social movements that are spaces of expression, contestation, and will formation between and among individuals. These formations are publics, and part of the role of educational leadership, in both schools and the localities that surround them, is to help facilitate their growth and political agency. In what follows, I describe key aspects of these organic publics: how they come into existence and evolve, as well as their agonistic and conflictual qualities. Following these descriptions, I then discuss a few necessary habits and skills helpful to educational leaders (again, broadly conceived) in achieving publics for public schools.

#### PROBLEMS CALL PUBLICS INTO EXISTENCE

An Ohio school district recently faced a controversy over the movie *American Beauty*.<sup>14</sup> Clips of this film were shown in 11th and 12th grade English classes as part of a unit on the American Dream. One group of parents became agitated upon discovering this, believing that schools are not the place to air the sexual and violent themes of films such as this one. Parents and community members sympathetic with this view petitioned the school board, calling for a ban on all R-rated movies in district classrooms. In reaction, other parents and teachers responded with petitions supporting the current way controversial materials are internally vetted within departments and through building principals. Many teachers believed that they had justifiable pedagogical reasons for using such movies. The well-respected English teacher who had used *American Beauty* clips had, since developing this unit a few years before the controversy erupted, sent home information and permission slips prior to teaching it each year. Yet in 2009, this usual notification did not suffice or appease, and a group of parents began to organize and attempt to exert influence against the use of controversial materials such as this. As Walter Parker points out, “public schools have become the place to

---

14. *American Beauty*, directed by Sam Mendes and written by Allen Ball (Universal City, California: Dreamworks, 1999). The Web site *Common Sense Media*, rates this film as “on the fence” for ages 17–18 for reasons of “graphic, bloody violence (including child abuse), extremely raw language, nudity, sex (including teen sex), and drug use that is very positively portrayed.” See “What Parents Need to Know,” *Common Sense Media*, <http://www.common sense media.org/movie-reviews/American-Beauty.html>.

engage in cultural warfare. They are the primary sites of struggle over the political and cultural shaping of the next generation."<sup>15</sup>

According to Dewey, "The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for."<sup>16</sup> This definition of the term "public" from his book *The Public and Its Problems* remains useful, as we can see through this contemporary example. The use of controversial materials in classrooms resulted in a series of transactions that immediately began to shape the problem, the players involved, and the wider responses of district officials.<sup>17</sup> Shocked parents called other parents, school board members were informally contacted, and more formal petitioning of the school board to rein in teachers' freedom to select instructional materials was initiated. A more formal policy, wherein teachers had to get permission from the school board or from a special Instructional Materials Approval subcommittee was quickly drawn up and under discussion in the district. These actions would have far-reaching consequences affecting many people and groups in this district, and thus a nascent public was created in the early weeks of the controversy. Those involved were made a public not by their agreement (the district had precious little of that) but by their shared experience of undergoing the consequences of a problem.

It is one thing for a public to begin to form in relation to schooling or educational problems. It is another, altogether more beneficial but difficult matter for a public to achieve some forms of maturity, such as creating common ground and political agency through habits of communication, leadership development, building power, and cocreation of solutions and accountability provisions for carrying them out. The public created around the *American Beauty* controversy never reached this kind of maturity. A glimpse into the forum held to hear from citizens about the controversy sheds light on some reasons why.<sup>18</sup> At the start of the forum, the school board chairperson faced the full room of citizens, students, teachers, and administrators, and asked them all to organize themselves into two groups: people wanting to speak for the proposed ban on R-rated movies, and people wanting to speak against it. The chair worked hard to give each side a fair hearing, making sure that an equal number of "for" and "against" views were aired, and providing the same number of allotted minutes at the microphone to

---

15. Walter C. Parker, "Constructing Public Schooling Today: Derision, Multiculturalism, Nationalism," in this issue, p. 422.

16. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 15–16.

17. Transactional understandings of communication view that process as more than a causal exchange of information between two or more people or groups, more than the stimulus and response reactions between oppressed and oppressor. For Dewey, the idea of transaction signals how communicative actions change all actors undergoing a communicative experience, despite the fact that communication is never "pure" but constantly moving through and in subjective interpretations and cultural contexts. For more on Dewey's transactionalism, see Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "A Pragmatist Revisiting of Resistance Theory," *American Educational Research Journal* 37, no. 4 (2000): 877–907.

18. I attended this forum; this account is based on my own observations of the meeting.



anyone who wanted to speak. The room was physically arranged in order for each person speaking to be heard by the board; persons testifying had to go up to the front of the auditorium and speak into the microphone, positioned so that the speaker would be facing the board, with their back to the audience.

It was clear that the board wanted each individual to have the right to be heard, and sought fair participation in governance, which they interpreted as providing “both sides” the right to come forward and speak to them publicly in the allotted time. They wanted to weigh principles of teacher professionalism along with those of fair participation in governance, and called upon the teacher using *American Beauty* to offer her rationale for using the film. But there was no “common good” readily available; moreover, the forum’s purpose and facilitation was not designed to construct one. The forum was designed to hear from the preconstructed sides or factions of the issue, carefully containing and managing the conflict so that the board could make their decision.

“Publics are called into being by issues”<sup>19</sup> — the issue, in this case, was critical focus on teachers’ use of controversial materials in the classroom. The public in this case was constituted by the shared but diverse consequences collectively endured by teachers, administrators, students, and citizens in a particular school district. Yet those involved with this problem failed to develop into a mature public, a public capable of investigating, effectively communicating, and applying political power to government institutions. “A public can form only if people are aware of the many ways that they are affected by events and how their actions affect one another in ongoing, important, and intricate ways.”<sup>20</sup> Such awareness develops through productive communication, ongoing investigation into the problems at hand, and wide dissemination of that information. What happens *within* a public formation, Dewey argued, *should* be the development of good habits of reflection, communication, and deliberation.<sup>21</sup>

Processes centered on sharing diverse perspectives in an effort to create some common ground were almost entirely absent in the film controversy. This group of parents, teachers, students, and community members thus constituted an ineffective public, largely unsettled in the weak consensus that constituted the school board’s ultimate decision to form a board-appointed parent and administrator committee to preapprove all teacher requests to use R-rated films. Board members and school administrators relied on the aggregative model of democracy to navigate the controversy, focusing tightly on strategies that would allow them to weigh teacher professionalism and pedagogical expertise against the views of diverse individual citizens.

---

19. See Noortje Marres, “Issues Spark a Public Into Being: A Key But Often Forgotten Point in the Lippmann-Dewey Debate,” in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), 216.

20. Elizabeth Meadows and Katherine Blatchford, “Achieving Widespread Democratic Education in the United States: Dewey’s Ideas Reconsidered,” *Education and Culture* 25, no. 1 (2009): 40.

21. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 208.

The public that formed around the R-rated film controversy failed to mature; citizens never achieved ways to successfully communicate and engage the complex issues and conflicts through a range of political means and practices. This public failed to develop sufficiently rich and varied forms of communication to express distinct positions as well as construct shared meanings regarding what kinds of materials might be appropriately used with students. It failed to build networks of influence across diverse groups, factions, and institutions that hold power and resources in the district. Processes of aggregative democracy were exclusively relied upon and in this case helped to "settle" the issue for some citizens. But these aggregative processes also served to deepen the divisions and conflicts over public schools in the district, rather than helping to create more shared educational perspectives and visions.

As Dewey wrote, "a public articulated and operating through representative officers is the state; there is no state without a government, but also there is none without the public."<sup>22</sup> The publics responsible for shaping and guiding the work of the state, when it comes to contemporary schooling, often seem to be either missing or so weak as to be effectively rendered silent. This is particularly true in light of the increasing prominence of federal and state authority over school curriculum and policy. A public is a group undergoing the consequences of a shared circumstance. But a public acquires the ability to have political voice and influence when its diverse members become more conscious of shared circumstances and purposes. Given our love affair with private fulfillments, our relative disengagement from active forms of public life, and the structure of our political systems and centrally controlled public schools, publics for schools today often remain at the embryonic stages and thus politically impotent. Yet this situation is not irrevocable.

School administrators frequently attempt to "manage" citizen engagement and contestation in ways that nip a nascent public in the bud. The terrain of public school governance is highly pluralistic in terms of the identities citizens bring to any particular problem in public life. These highly pluralistic, inchoate publics often contain numerous conflicts and differences of thinking about school aims and resource allocation. These social formations contain much passion and often rancor; school leaders may understandably fear this passion.

It is useful, however, to frame this passion and pluralism with an eye to its great political potential. Chantal Mouffe calls public life today a space of "agonistic democracy."<sup>23</sup> "Agonistic" means argumentative and strained. This strain is not a modern invention but inherent in what Mouffe calls "the paradox of liberal democracy," a situation that cannot be fixed. The paradox of liberal democracy consists in the tensions between liberal and democratic traditions; the former focusing on liberty of the individual, the latter focusing on achieving equality and popular sovereignty. Public schools confront such tensions regularly. Engaging in public

---

22. *Ibid.*, 67.

23. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 2.

life today means engaging this paradox, and negotiating its terms in the context of specific situations and problems, and in situations that are often antagonistic:

A goal as well as a task for democratic politics is, therefore, to transform antagonistic conflicts into what Mouffe calls agonistic ones. The latter means to convert conflicts that are threatening to dissolve the basis for political association into conflicts in which the legitimacy of the other's position is acknowledged. To acknowledge and respect the other's right to be a legitimate opponent not only makes it possible to channel the conflict *politically* but also is itself a pre-requisite for such channeling. This means that democratic institutions are democratic to the degree they are able to promote legitimate opposition through political means.<sup>24</sup>

"Antagonism," in other words, "may be ineradicable but it is not irreducible."<sup>25</sup> What is at stake in political struggles such as the one seen in the *American Beauty* controversy is the political "'we' — the hegemonic struggle to articulate 'a common political identity of persons.'"<sup>26</sup> Agonistic citizens have learned, through specific political practices, how to be "friendly enemies" able to forge conflictual consensus.<sup>27</sup>

This type of political work cannot be tackled through the machinery of public relations, nor by political means based solely in the constitutional principles of liberal-democratic society and aggregative democratic governance. It requires a particular set of habits and skills that help to build mature publics capable of productively engaging with school boards, administrators, educators, and fellow citizens. I use the remainder of this article to explain and elaborate on these habits.

#### THE WORK OF ACHIEVING PUBLICS

Habits are developed dispositions for established forms of action and thought; "a habit is a form of executive skill, an efficiency in doing," as Dewey noted.<sup>28</sup> Alison Kedlac argues that habits are

acquisitions that require the use of reason and active preference; in a basic sense, habits are *skills*. Once we think of habits as skills, rather than as mechanical and thoughtless modes of action, it is possible to view the acquisition of habits as a matter of "thought, invention, and initiative in applying capacities to new aims."<sup>29</sup>

Habits or skills (I use these terms interchangeably) of public development are necessary for democratic governance. Some of these habits stand in stark opposition to the typical types of managerial and administrative habits characteristic of public schooling today. I argue here that habits of *communication*, *leadership development*, and *building power* are necessary for achieving publics for public

24. Sharon Todd and Carl Anders Säfström, "Democracy, Education and Conflict: Rethinking Respect and the Place of the Ethical," *Journal of Educational Controversy* 3, no. 1 (2008), <http://www.wce.wvu.edu/Resources/CEP/ejournal/v003n001/a012.shtml>.

25. Chantal Mouffe, "Liberal Socialism and Pluralism: Which Citizenship?" in *Principled Positions*, ed. Judith Squires (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), 82.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 13.

28. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 46.

29. Alison Kadlec, *Dewey's Critical Pragmatism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 72. The embedded quote is from Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 52–53.

schooling. These are habits or skills that are the broad work of educational leadership, as carried out by school personnel, board members, and leaders in multiple civic realms of a district or region.

#### HABITS OF COMMUNICATION

Many school administrators and staff approach communication with citizens on a very carefully orchestrated and narrowly framed basis. Surveys are used to gather specific input from parents. "Customer hotlines" are places where parents or citizens can call up with complaints, praise, or suggestions. At any school board meeting, a citizen can come to address the board in the preliminary 5 or 10 minutes at the beginning of the meeting, and most meetings are open to the public. In general, habits of communication between formal school leaders and the citizens they represent are narrow, tightly framed, and fall along the lines of aggregative democracy patterns — where democracy is a process of aggregating the individual opinions that comprise the mass electorate.

Yet aggregate democratic forms of governance cannot adequately capture or channel the pluralist public, and one popular alternative offered today is deliberative democratic processes, more explicitly participatory forms of governance. Deliberation about matters relating to shared life and governance happens in many informal ways and places in our society; for example, people discussed the *American Beauty* controversy at the local store, church, gym, bar, and through media networks. Formal public deliberations, however, are facilitated forums designed to help citizens talk to one another about shared problems in an attempt to find common ground and solutions. Much of our public work involves informal deliberation of all kinds, where people exchange views through conversation or argument. But deliberating in formal, organized settings with trained moderators tries to foster more than the exchange of opinions: it aims to hammer out mutually agreeable solutions. The deliberative model of democracy, as it is described by its advocates, aims to "structure processes of collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals."<sup>30</sup> Deliberation as a habit of administrators, board members, and other school leaders is a key skill for achieving public schools. Yet too often deliberation is seen simplistically: as a process of reaching a pure consensus through rational exchanges between diverse individuals. I wish to suggest a more organic and pragmatist view of deliberation as necessary for habits of communication that can help achieve publics for schools.

Deliberation is a type of communication strategy that is essential for public achievement in school governance and politics, but the formations of deliberative democracy typically offered in political theory rely too heavily on assumptions of the powers of rational argumentation and the mythology of pure consensus. Deliberation, in the views of many advocates, shifts the nature of political

---

30. Seyla Benhabib, "Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 69.

activities as compiled, aggregated individual interests to a common good achieved through peaceful but rigorous argumentation:

The public deliberation that leads to the formation of a general will has the form of a debate in which competing particular interests are given equal consideration. It requires of participants that they engage in “ideal role-taking” to try to understand the situations and perspectives of others and give them equal weight to their own.<sup>31</sup>

Jürgen Habermas sought to revitalize the notion of the public sphere in the deliberative view of politics, where citizens achieve the common good through rational argument, developing a shared political will that should guide the actions of government-run institutions.

In the *American Beauty* incident, a respected teacher was called out on using segments of a controversial film in her teaching, and a nascent public started to develop in response. The school board valiantly tried to manage the controversy according to constitutional principles (that is, according to the unitary, capital-P Public ideal), creating shared governance whereby diverse citizens could air their already established views on the subject, and where teachers and administrators could share their professional expertise in realms of pedagogy. The board’s aim was to make a good decision by aggregating the voters’ views, seeking an outcome everyone could tolerate — a particularly important goal in a state where voters decide upon school tax levies at the ballot box. But what if these administrators had not focused exclusively on the aims of aggregate democracy and had instead considered deliberative democratic processes as part of a broader solution? What if the forum was more of an exercise, or one of a set of exercises, in deliberation? What if citizens on *all* sides of the issue had been invited to think together, trying to understand the problem from multiple perspectives, and work on mutually agreeable solutions?

While nascent publics can and do emerge in political life, deliberative habits of communication — those that engage citizens in deliberation over “hot issues” — can help call a public into existence and facilitate its development. Deliberations can occur in many places, and a growing number of organizations in public sector and public schooling reform efforts advocate greater use of formal and informal deliberations in school-based decisions and controversies.<sup>32</sup> Deliberation assumes that democracy is not solely a process of aggregating opinions, but of helping citizens struggle to find some common ground about their shared problems. Deliberative habits and forums are needed not only within seemingly like-minded groups but more particularly across distinct groups within a district or a school.<sup>33</sup>

---

31. Thomas McCarthy, “Practical Discourse: On the Relation of Morality to Politics,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), 54.

32. See, for example, Suzanne Ashby, Cris Garza, and Maggie Rivas, “Public Deliberation: A Tool for Connecting School Reform and Diversity,” in *Southwest Educational Development Laboratory* (Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1999).

33. For a discussion of bonding and bridging communication among social groups, see Sabina Panth, “Bonding vs. Bridging,” *People, Spaces, Deliberation* (June 3, 2010), <http://blogs.worldbank.org/publicsphere/node/5456>.

Deliberative habits can be facilitated and developed, yet the habit of deliberation is not about a purely rational exchange of viewpoints. Deliberations that create common ground are not easy to construct, and efforts to create deliberative settings that are “highly dispassionate cognitive processes,” devoid of emotion and irrationality, are fruitless.<sup>34</sup> Particularly in this society of radical pluralism and high levels of inequality, deliberations facilitated merely by way of allowing peaceful, rigorous argumentation — where emotions, passions, and bodies are purposefully excluded, where only carefully timed speeches and argument are allowed as legitimate modes of participation — are inadequate. As Richard Bernstein notes in his characterization of Deweyan democracy,

Dewey was never happy with the way in which philosophers and political theorists characterized reason — especially when they sharply distinguished reason from emotion, desire, and passion. He preferred to speak about intelligence and intelligent action. Intelligence is not the name of a special faculty. Rather, it designates a cluster of habits and dispositions that includes attentiveness to details, imagination, and passionate commitment. What is most essential for Dewey is the *embodiment* of intelligence in everyday practices.<sup>35</sup>

Publics must communicate, but they do not productively do so within narrowly conceived boundaries of rationality.<sup>36</sup> Deliberative habits and skills are most effective when they recognize and integrate embodied and symbolic forms of communication into deliberative practice and forums. Part of the role of educational leaders, broadly defined, is to demonstrate and facilitate the conditions for these habits when it comes to engaging citizens in their schools.

#### HABITS OF LEADERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

In schools, the term “leader” almost always refers to someone in charge, a person who has a formal appointment or title that enables that person to use his or her formal authority to make things happen. “Leadership” is thus a positional practice and a privileged occupation, held by a relative few — usually by administrative staff (even though, ironically, the practice of leadership can be seen in virtually every classroom). But broader views of leadership, and more inclusive practices of informal leadership, are required for the work of achieving publics. Formal leaders of schools can usually only respond to the will of local people; they cannot by themselves organize or initiate public formations, and they cannot alone build the organizational structures that help publics communicate and formulate their aims. Our current habits of leadership and leadership development can, unfortunately, restrict our abilities to achieve publics for public schools.

---

34. The quote is from Daniel Yankelovich, “How to Achieve Sounder Public Judgment,” in *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*, ed. Daniel Yankelovich and Will Friedman (Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010), 26. Yankelovich writes, “Hundreds of studies of public opinion have convinced me that the public’s learning curve is not a dispassionately rational process. Instead, it is charged with all manner of emotion and irrationality” (p. 26). See also Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). For a revealing study of two deliberative experiments in school reform work, see Julie A. Marsh, *Democratic Dilemmas: Joint Work, Education Politics, and Community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

35. Richard J. Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 85.

36. See Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*.

To show the significance of new habits of leadership, let us again imagine a different scenario surrounding the *American Beauty* controversy. Let us suppose that a group of parents, after airing their views at the open forum, believed they could not find a reasonable hearing of their views and were still dissatisfied with the district's current policy. Let us further suppose that these parents engaged in additional activism along the lines of community organizing. That is, rather than protesting the policy only as individuals, they formed alliances and a formal organization that served as the vehicle for their aims and goals. Publics can erupt in many ways, and many today do so with the facilitation of community organizing traditions and strategies. Looking at these traditions of public formation shows us a great deal about how publics are achieved through multiple forms of leadership development and practice.

Since the early 1990s, there has been an increase in the use of school-related community organizing in American towns and cities to bring about school reform, and in particular to "disrupt long-standing power relationships that produce failing schools in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods and communities of color."<sup>37</sup> Perhaps the most studied and well documented of these organizing efforts is that of Austin Interfaith, an outgrowth of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in Texas. IAF engages local institutions, primarily faith congregations, to advocate social change. "IAF works with poor, working-class, and often less-educated people, channeling anger about inequality into an agenda for political action."<sup>38</sup> In Austin, Texas, IAF helped to form Austin Interfaith, an alliance of congregations working on behalf of children and families in poor neighborhoods in the city's east side. These congregations, in turn, created a now growing network of Alliance Schools, devoted to reform. Through "accountability sessions, parent and community engagement in schools, and careful work to build trust with educators," citizens and organizers helped to improve these schools. "In these schools, Austin Interfaith organizers provided leadership training to parents, teachers, and administrators and supported them in implementing reforms to improve student learning."<sup>39</sup>

Leadership — on the part of organizers, citizen leaders, school administrators, and teachers — built the organization and strategies to help Austin schools in largely African American and Hispanic neighborhoods improve. While widely thought of as an innate capacity related to personal charisma or positional authority, leadership is best conceived not as a position or an innate power but as an activity. As Ronald Heifetz writes, "rather than define leadership either as a position of authority in a social structure or as a personal set of characteristics,

---

37. Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister, *Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture: Austin Interfaith* (Providence, Rhode Island: Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, 2009), 3, [http://www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/Mott\\_Austin.php](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/Mott_Austin.php).

38. Norman J. Glickman and Corianne P. Scally, "Can Community and Education Organizing Improve Inner-City Schools?" *Journal of Urban Affairs* 30, no. 5 (2008): 565.

39. Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister, *Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture*, 1.

we may find it a great deal more useful to define leadership as an *activity*.<sup>40</sup> Many successful organizing efforts point to the role of leadership and its ongoing development as an important area of focus and key to their successes. Achieving publics for public schools requires leadership habits and skills spread across school organizations and across multiple civic sectors.

The development of citizen leaders in education organizing is characterized by, at minimum, the acquisition of three types of knowledge. The first is an understanding of the wider social conditions and political contexts as well as the larger systemic issues of the problems at hand. The second concerns the appropriate interpersonal and political skills needed to move a group forward. The third is knowledge of how to wield democratic authority and judgment that is inclusive and accountable to the broader group, and ultimately to the wider Public.

Effective leadership in democratic organizations requires the ability to help others come to political judgment, that is, to weigh alternatives and decide on a course of action together.<sup>41</sup> To help others come to judgment about a group's goals and strategies, citizens working in leadership must achieve a deeper understanding of the context of schooling. They must particularly become more knowledgeable about the political, economic, and pedagogical factors that shape how schools function. This is especially important for leadership development within public formation for low-income neighborhoods. Many in these communities do not know how to access reliable information about their school's or district's resources, procedures, or outcomes, despite the efforts of some school administrators who may have good intentions in opening their schools up to all sorts of families. Citizens, often with the help of organizers, engage in inquiry about schooling, enabling them to build the power of knowledge about their schools, as well as enhancing their analytical abilities.<sup>42</sup>

Leadership development often combines knowledge of educational issues and systems with the technical skills of public work:

To develop knowledge and skills, parent leaders participate in trainings, mentoring sessions, small group meetings, and public actions. From these experiences parents and community members expand their understanding of educational matters. They learn how the school system works, including issues related to curriculum and budget. They acquire an understanding of school data and how to use it to leverage change. Moreover, parents and communities become skilled at public speaking, researching issues, leading meetings, and negotiating with public officials.<sup>43</sup>

---

40. Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 20 (emphasis in original).

41. Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 212.

42. An excellent example of this kind of learning is described in Jeannie Oakes and John Rogers, *Learning Power: Organizing for Education and Justice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

43. M. Elena Lopez, *Transforming Schools Through Community Organizing: A Research Review* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Family Involvement Network of Educators, Harvard Family Research Project, 2003), 3.



Leadership not only helps organizing groups come to judgment about goals and strategies through enhanced knowledge about schooling, but it helps guide the group's "collective efforts in the political arena."<sup>44</sup> Guiding these efforts also requires the technical skills and capacities of political work: "leading meetings, interviewing public officials, representing the community at public events and with the media, and negotiating with those in power."<sup>45</sup>

Leading responsibly in more organic and participatory forms of democratic governance is not synonymous with eliminating the authority or power of leaders. While egalitarian processes of leadership can be very successful, some observers of community organizing remind us that patterns of authority are useful in organizing work:

Most advocates of participatory democracy have become uncomfortable with discussions of authority. But utopian preferences for pure egalitarian relationships are unrealistic for developing effective power for communities. Social relations that are characterized entirely by hierarchy, of course, are oppressive and lend little to democratic action. Yet most communities contain some pattern of authority. Political leadership in collective processes, in fact, requires the development of authority. The question is whether authority is legitimate, inclusive, and accountable to the broader community.<sup>46</sup>

Publics develop and mature through leadership, and through the broad development of democratic authority and skills not only among formal, positional school leaders but among potential leaders drawn from the teachers, parents, citizens, and civic groups in a locality. Rather than a special club of formal leaders, "leadership" here is constituted by a practice that is cultivated among multiple constituencies for the purposes of educational problem solving. This leadership helps broaden the scope of public work and ensures that public aims and concerns more accurately reflect the wishes of the diverse populace. Habits of both leadership and leadership development are critical in helping publics grow and mature as vehicles for participatory democratic governance of public schools. Education organizers have, in particular, become well versed in such skills, understanding that "leadership is not by nature a form of individual aggrandizement, but rather a means of continuing to expand the number of their fellow-leaders in the interest of collective power."<sup>47</sup>

#### HABITS OF BUILDING PUBLIC INFLUENCE

Building influence and power is a part of public formation and development, because a public forms to construct a response related to a shared problem; in

---

44. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 212.

45. Eva Gold and Elaine Simon, *Successful Community Organizing for School Reform* (Chicago: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2002), 13, <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers2003/goldsimon/goldsimon.htm>.

46. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 35. See also Aaron Schutz's discussion of leadership trends in organizing as they relate to social class in "Social Class and Social Action: The Middle-Class Bias of Democratic Theory in Education," *Teachers College Record* 110, no. 2 (2008): 405–442.

47. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 214.

many cases part or all of this response relates to school governance and the policies it creates. A nascent public must build influence in governance in order to shape the solutions that are constructed. Power is defined here simply as the ability to authentically participate and exercise influence in decision-making processes.<sup>48</sup>

Publics are often comprised of individuals who, as solitary citizens, have been able to exercise little influence in school decision making; these are associations of people who see real problems and gaps in the ways that their schools work, often for their own children as well as others. Without practices that enable these groups to have a legitimate and respected voice in decision making about their own schools, these groups cannot build political will and agency, and they remain politically weak.

Formal school leaders fear the power of publics, however, and this often leads them to squelch their emergence. In many cases formal school leaders are concerned about the challenge to their own authority and vision, but they also legitimately fear that the agenda of any one public may not reflect the interests of the Public writ large. This points to an important question that emerges when (unelected) publics are seen as associations that can build and wield power in school governance. Are education organizing groups the kinds of "special interests" that seek power simply in order to promote their own political agendas?

It is the case that associations form around school problems and issues that are indeed only designed to achieve a group's own narrow interests, without regard for larger Public constitutional principles. The bifocal view of public life can help educational leaders discern how various groups' interests intersect with the larger Public interests. Without a doubt, organizing groups and public formations can assert interests that do not meet the criteria of Public-with-a-capital-P interests. A group seeking to teach the Bible as the literal word of God in public schools would have a hard time convincing Muslim, atheist, and Hindu citizens and associations that such a goal represents a shared and public interest. Interests or agendas asserted as Public interests must be debated and judged by leaders and citizens, according to the merits of each particular agenda. These interests must be politically legitimate for public schools in a constitutional democracy. Democratic faith in "the people" needs to be balanced with a respect for the unitary, symbolic Public of the constitutional principles — "the people" are not purely virtuous, nor is their idea of "public interest" always aligned with a larger Public interest. Yet what is in the overarching interests of the

---

48. Participation in school decision-making processes is *authentic* if it "includes relevant stakeholders and creates relatively safe, structured spaces for multiple voices to be heard." Authentic participation in school governance should result in the "constitution of a democratic citizenry and redistributive justice for disenfranchised groups or, in educational terms, more equal levels of student achievement and improved social and academic outcomes for *all* students." See Gary L. Anderson, "Toward Authentic Participation: Deconstructing the Discourses of Participatory Reforms in Education," *American Educational Research Journal* 35, no. 4 (1998): 575.

public writ large can never be resolved ahead of time, before views are aired, deliberated, questioned, and evaluated by citizens, school boards, and school leaders.<sup>49</sup>

What is in the Public interest, then? This is a tricky question, yet in real-world school politics it is too often simplistically equated with the interests of the most powerful citizens. Consider the newly emerging publics forming in response to the shared problems of educational inequality. Citizens seeking greater equity in the processes, facilities, and outcomes of their children's schools are building associations and organizations to reach their goals. On the broad level, such a set of interests is clearly Public and widely shared in terms of the constitutional interest in equality, though it can be tremendously difficult to convince some families of this fact as the micro-politics of school governance play out. Gaps in graduation rates, college matriculation, and academic achievement persist along racial, ethnic, and social class lines, and such unequal conditions and outcomes are antithetical to the primary democratic principle of equal opportunity. Such gaps erode the political legitimacy of public schools, and institutional legitimacy is an enabling factor for the success of all public schools. Attacking these gaps is clearly part of the work of nascent and well-developed publics around the nation, whose influence helps focus attention on these gaps and hold officials accountable for remedying them. However, the work to increase local resources for poor and working-class students meets frequent and powerful resistance from more privileged citizens in a school or district.<sup>50</sup> Despite the efforts in some districts to introduce more participatory forms of decision making that are inclusive of all kinds of families, some parents and citizens exercise more influence than others in school governance. Inclusive and fair participation in shared governance is one of the principles of democratic legitimacy for public schools in a constitutional democratic state. Yet even in school districts where participatory reforms have been introduced, the interests of the poor and working class tend to be neglected. "Ostensibly, participation in decision making is intended to provide more opportunities for disenfranchised groups to have a greater voice in organizational life, but too often the opposite occurs."<sup>51</sup> It therefore stands to reason that attention to practices of building power and influence are part of the work of public facilitation and development, particularly given

---

49. Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 87.

50. See, for example, Beatrice S. Fennimore, "Brown and the Failure of Civic Responsibility," *Teachers College Record* 107, no. 9 (2005): 1905–1932. This point is also well made by David Labaree: "Families have been willing to acknowledge that the system should provide educational access for other people's children, but only as long as it also has provided educational advantage for their own." See David F. Labaree, "Consuming the Public School," in this issue, p. 381.

51. Anderson, "Toward Authentic Participation," 580. For more analysis of inauthentic participation and community engagement practices in urban schools, see Aaron Schutz, "Home Is a Prison in the Global City: The Tragic Failure of School-Based Community Engagement Strategies," *Review of Educational Research* 76, no. 4 (2006): 691–743.

the critical educational challenges affecting disenfranchised neighborhoods and communities.

Publics build power by acquiring influence. Skills of producing political influence can vary in tone and aim from confrontational to collaborative. On the confrontational end of the continuum, publics can conduct mass actions and demonstrations that garner sustained media attention, subjecting schools or districts to enormous public pressure to include their voices in school decision making. Such actions can generate "fear and respect" on the part of school and city officials so that these groups will be included in future decision-making processes.<sup>52</sup> The IAF in Texas regularly uses parent assemblies, for example, as part of a plan to move conversations with superintendents, principals, and school board members into public settings, where empowered leaders give prepared speeches and pose incisive questions to school officials, in the eye of media. "Large public assemblies," for the IAF, "are key venues in which communities can begin the process of assertive self-governance and the nurturance of a proactive civic culture."<sup>53</sup> Other publics use more combative types of action such as walkouts, strikes, and protests.<sup>54</sup> Confrontational practices make use of the idea of the adversary as a motivating force for political action. Combative practices such as sit-ins or marches try to create a temporary "us versus them" mentality, but "enemies in this model are not static entities or individuals, then, but instead fluid and strategic achievements that allow a community to act as a coherent collective."<sup>55</sup>

Contrasting with confrontational practices of building power are more collaborative forms. It is worth noting here that publics originating through community organizing practices are too often charged with being overly confrontational. "Popular writings on community organizing sometimes overemphasize the combative nature of these groups," writes Aaron Schutz, who participates in and studies education organizing efforts in Milwaukee. He points out that "organizing groups nearly always begin their efforts in a new campaign with attempts at dialogue with those in authority. Only when they have been rebuffed do these groups begin to pursue more militant strategies."<sup>56</sup> Many of the most successful organizing efforts have achieved positive working collaborations with school districts and leaders, shifting antagonistic terrain to agonistic space. These groups have successfully

---

52. Schutz, "Home Is a Prison in the Global City," 717.

53. Shirley, *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform*, 69.

54. See, for example, those described in National Center for Schools and Communities, *From Schoolhouse to Statehouse: Community Organizing for Public School Reform* (New York: Fordham University, 2002), 19, <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED467358>.

55. Aaron Schutz, "Rethinking Domination and Resistance: Challenging Postmodernism," *Educational Researcher* 33, no. 1 (2004): 20.

56. Schutz, "Home Is a Prison in the Global City," 718. The research done on education organizing as reported in *From Schoolhouse to Statehouse* also echoes this finding (see p. 19).

tapped into the kinds of power that can be built through human relationship. Ernesto Cortés, IAF organizer, distinguishes between unilateral power and relational power. While the former is typically coercive and domineering, “the IAF teaches people to develop the power that is embedded in relationships, involving not only the capacity to act, but the reciprocal capacity to be acted upon.”<sup>57</sup> Education organizers have used strategies for both relational and unilateral power, but their goals are usually collaborative in some way. “These groups are willing to confront powerful institutions, but only when recalcitrant elites refuse to negotiate. They approach schools as partners, but this does not mean ignoring tensions and conflicts.”<sup>58</sup> Though IAF was founded by Saul Alinsky, well-known for his confrontational tactics, the Alliance School organizing work represents the evolution that some community organizing efforts have undergone in the recent decades. Alliance Schools are schools that have chosen to enter into an agreement with Austin Interfaith, an IAF affiliate. Teachers and administrators elect to enter into a relation with Austin Interfaith in order to become an Alliance School, but from there, no prescription exists for the work to be done. IAF organizers organize parents as well as teachers, principals, staff, and students to address a range of school issues. “In this approach, public schools are not the object or target of outside community organizing; rather, organizing occurs in the school with all of its stakeholders.”<sup>59</sup> More collaborative forms, as Mark Warren notes, have more frequently been successful in “creating the civic capacity to build and sustain school reform. Taking a more relational understanding of power, parents and educators can look to their shared interest in advancing the education and well-being of children in order to help them work through inevitable differences and conflicts.”<sup>60</sup>

Practices of building power are, in effect, efforts that build relations and relational networks among publics, officials, and other local organizations, often including national organizations and networks. These relationships are not without conflict, agonisms, and difficult confrontation; thus we should not understand the term “relational” to be a description of easy collegiality or immediate understanding among groups whose differences can be quite substantial. Trying to establish a public’s presence and authority in decision-making processes is often an unwelcome intrusion on the part of school administrators and boards. In addition, building collaboration across groups and constituencies is challenging. Developing relations among groups who may have very distinct ethnic, racial, social-class, or linguistic identities requires time, patience, and a sensitivity to

---

57. Shirley, *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform*, 85.

58. Mark R. Warren, “Communities and Schools: A New View of Urban Education Reform,” *Harvard Educational Review* 75, no. 2 (2005): 5.

59. *Ibid.*, 20.

60. Mark R. Warren, Soo Hong, Carolyn Leung Rubin, and Phitsamay Sychitkokhong Uy, “Beyond the Bake Sale: A Community Based Relational Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools,” *Teachers College Record* 111, no. 9 (2009): 2213.

the obvious and not-so-obvious ways in which the powerful can co-opt and silence the voices of the disenfranchised. Developing relational networks among all these groups and interests is enabled when school administrators, board members, and educators do not see the development of powerful publics as threatening or counterproductive to school governance, but as unique opportunities for building the civic capacity necessary for better quality schooling for all students.

#### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article, the bifocal nature of “the public” of public schooling has been sketched; I have put into focus the dual and complex nature of taxpayer-funded school governance. The public moniker refers both to the universal, constitutionally based Public sphere and the more organic and episodic publics emerging from shared problems. The individual is simultaneously a rights-bearing citizen and a part of a public; he or she is an eruption of political voice, a political identity, and potential power to participate in and influence decisions related to schools. The “public” of public schooling, therefore, is a paradox and must be actively negotiated by school leaders as such.

The good news is that there is no magic to this negotiation. It requires an understanding of the paradox of public life, as well as a developed sense of the particular habits and skills necessary for making nascent, emergent publics into collaborative school partners. Perhaps most difficult for many school administrators, it requires a willingness to infuse one’s leadership and educational work with the kinds of habits and skills required to engage in public work with other citizens, especially those outside the schoolhouse.

The challenges to this work, however, are significant in today’s political climate. Among them is the current context of school governance, where much control over education is currently situated in state and federal governing bodies. Engaging with the public requires that federal and state control be in healthy balance with forms of local governance that are meaningful. Another challenge is that this work requires a number of facilitating partners: civic associations, community organizing groups, deliberative democracy organizations, and others must play a role in the public work described here. School administrators, school board members, and teachers have neither the time nor the training to handle this work alone, and it requires the energy and multiple perspectives that “the people” can provide.

Yet such resources are more available and growing stronger in number and power today. In a series of 2005 blog posts, philosopher and civic education researcher Peter Levine discusses the social movement for civic renewal in the United States. He listed major elements in that movement, including deliberative democracy work, community wealth generation, democratic community organizing work, civic education, service-learning initiatives, community youth development work, work to defend and expand the commons, the development of new forms of public media, the development of social software, and the civically

engaged university.<sup>61</sup> These resources represent an array of new knowledge, energy, and networks that school leaders of all kinds can tap into in order to help achieve publics for their schools. Civic renewal creates important new resources for public schools, building forms of “wiggle room” and agency in times when structures like No Child Left Behind, school vouchers, and privatization cause many to abandon hope of public schools governed in the public’s interest.<sup>62</sup>

---

61. Peter Levine, “The Civic Renewal Movement,” *Peter Levine: A Blog for Civic Renewal* (June 20, 2005), <http://www.peterlevine.ws/mt/archives/000631.html>. See also Peter Levine, “The Public and Our Problems,” *National Civic Review* 100, no. 1 (2011): 42–50.

62. The reference to “wiggle room” here is taken from Parker, “Constructing Public Schooling Today,” in this issue. Wiggle room is the “space to act within and around constraints” (p. 414).





Copyright of Educational Theory is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.