



**CITIZEN MOBILIZATION AND COMMUNITY
INSTITUTIONS: THE PUBLIC EDUCATION
NETWORK'S POLICY INITIATIVES**

Executive Summary

Brenda J. Turnbull

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Policy Studies Associates
1718 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20009
www.policystudies.com

Summary

This report analyzes the results of a bold set of initiatives designed to stimulate and support public responsibility for public education in 14 locales around the country. Local education funds (LEFs) led these initiatives, which received support from the Annenberg Foundation through the LEFs' national organization, the Public Education Network (PEN). In each of the three initiatives, the LEFs were expected to lead a process of community engagement in one area of local education policy: equipping students to meet the standards set forth in accountability systems; improving teaching quality; or strengthening school-community ties.

The LEFs worked to forge a stronger and more durable role for the public in the reform of the public schools. The goal was an active, informed constituency, broadly based in the community, that would hold a shared vision of school reform and would hold the school system accountable for delivering on that vision. Although the initiatives had policy objectives, the main point was less about the substance of policy than about the origins and ownership of policy. The LEFs were expected to lay the groundwork for democratically determined education policies and services that would have staying power.

The initiatives sought to break out of stereotypical images of public engagement. They were not about reforms that originate in superintendents' offices and that enlist public support through an information campaign. Nor were they focused exclusively on the involvement of parents. Instead, the aim was to support active public participation, community-wide, in determining policy directions and holding the school system accountable.

With six-month planning grants followed by three-year implementation grants, the participating LEFs worked toward this ideal. They convened inclusive public conversations about public schools and how to improve them; they enlisted professional service providers in collaboration; and they communicated with policymakers about priorities that emerged.

As evaluator of the initiatives, Policy Studies Associates (PSA) documented these activities and gathered evidence of the extent to which members of the public in the participating communities took action to exercise greater responsibility for public education. The evaluation methods were entirely qualitative, including in-person and telephone interviews with a range of community members, review of documents, and observation of all the key national events of the initiatives as well as several local events.

Based on the analysis of this evidence, the evaluators conclude that in one of the participating sites, the ambitious ideal of the initiatives was very substantially realized. In that site—Mobile, Alabama—the LEF organized broad-

based public participation by Mobile County residents in articulating a vision for the education of all children, pressing for school improvement aligned with that vision, and monitoring the system's progress. Policy and practice have changed in response to public engagement. The success achieved in Mobile demonstrates that the aims of the initiatives are in fact reachable.

Evidence from the other sites suggests that the vision could eventually be realized elsewhere, as well. Nearly all of the participating sites broadened participation in policy conversations and saw some changes in policy, although the public was not the driving force for policy change in these other sites. Some examples include the following:

- Voters in Portland, Oregon, replaced their school board with one more likely to act on a community strategic plan for education
- Public dialogues conducted across the state of West Virginia generated a set of shared beliefs that were translated into action steps at a statewide summit that brought together policy leaders and grass-roots community members
- In Durham, North Carolina, all major officeholders signed a Covenant for Education that gives the community the means to hold them accountable for supporting school improvement
- School-based Community Learning Centers are up and running in Lincoln, Nebraska, with active collaboration and financial support from a range of community agencies

A few participating LEFs made little progress toward realizing the vision of more broad-based and active public responsibility. In each of these cases, staff changes and competing organizational priorities weakened the focus on the initiatives' aims—although even in these sites there were activities consistent with the initiatives, with some resulting response from the public.

Aside from these few least-successful sites, all the other LEFs saw many instances of individuals and organizations in the community attending events, raising their voices for school reform, planning together, and taking action. Most also saw some changes in policy and practice. Whether the public will continue to support and press for a shared policy vision remains an open question at this time, but groundwork is in place for such a result in most of the participating sites.

Because the design of the PEN policy initiatives is unconventional in education reform—not centered on the work of the professionals in school systems, but instead straddling schools and community in order to strengthen both—this report contains a good deal of description of the work that was done

and the community response that ensued. Public responsibility is a new field of endeavor in education reform, and this report seeks to contribute to the field by building a descriptive base of knowledge about it. The report also analyzes the strengths and weaknesses found in the implementation of the initiatives, identifying both local and national factors.

The initiatives have been important to PEN because they demonstrate how LEFs, as organizations that work closely with both school systems and communities, are positioned to take leadership in public responsibility. The initiatives also have broad implications in demonstrating the purposeful mobilization of public responsibility for public education. Looking ahead, it is possible to imagine a basis for education policy that is more democratically grounded and less subject to technocratic or partisan extremes, thanks to its base in an informed and active community.