

[president's message]

TRANSLATING PUBLIC CONCERNS

INTO A Shared Responsibility

BY WENDY PURIEFOY

“America will only get the high-quality public schools its children deserve when individuals in local communities are willing to do whatever is necessary to create those schools. That is one of the clearest lessons to emerge from the past 15 years of reform. PEN is putting its resources and energies in the right places by supporting what research says works: better teaching, higher standards, accountability, student motivation, equitable school finance, and community involvement.”

RONALD A. WOLK

founder *Education Week* and *Teacher Magazine*
and a member of the PEN Board

Five years ago, Robert D. Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard University, put into words the conditions of urban life with which many of us were all too familiar. In his book, *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*, Putnam chronicled the steady decline of civic involvement in America on a wide scale—a fall in the memberships of unions, the Boy Scouts and the Red Cross, and a drop in church attendance and, yes, even a fall in the percentage of Americans who participate in bowling leagues.

Not all civic or grassroots organizations saw their numbers decline, but Putnam noted that most of the groups experiencing growth were non-participatory, mass-membership organizations in which members have very limited contact with each other. In other words, one isn't expected to attend meetings or contribute time but to share ideas and give financial resources.

My purpose in mentioning Putnam's book is not to lament prevailing social trends, but to offer some context for the opportunity that lies before us. For if ever there were an issue that had the potential to galvanize communities and help to break this disturbing trend of disengagement, it is public education. The opportunity is clear, given that for weeks leading up to the recent national elections, Americans repeatedly identified education as the issue that was most important to them. Further evidence of this opportunity can be seen across the country in the many people who are already involved in improving school quality and who are helping to move their communities from a state of “concern” to a shared sense of responsibility.

Indeed, in Putnam's message I find not simply a declaration, but a challenge: to translate the concern that the public feels about public education into social capital that engenders this shared sense of responsibility and helps to raise student achievement. The communities in which our 55 local education funds (LEFs) are active attest to the fact that this kind of engagement is possible.

However, there are many communities without LEFs or any other vehicle to facilitate and build social capital. Far too many people feel isolated from the decisions and events that determine how the public schools in their communities operate. Many others are willing to vote in school board elections or buy candy to support a school fundraising project, and

they may even believe that these activities mean they are “playing a role.”

It is time we raised the bar and let the public know that we need them to play a much more critical role than this. LEFs have been working diligently to help send this message and engage the public. Moreover, LEFs have been major initiators and facilitators of reform—coordinating and funding meaningful reforms, meeting staff development needs of teachers and other staff, and convening and brokering with other community groups to build consensus for reform efforts. The evidence of LEFs' success lies in the impressive results from the resources they bring to their communities on behalf of better public education. Since 1991, LEFs have raised and distributed nearly one billion dollars to support school reform efforts designed to increase student achievement and build community support to advance student learning. In fact, in 2000 alone, LEFs contributed over \$15 million to support high quality professional development for teachers in low-performing schools.

In addition to being tireless advocates for quality, LEFs have long served as a clearinghouse for critical information—data that enable parents and the public to learn more about how their schools function, as well as helping them to make informed decisions. Over the past year, the Metropolitan Nashville Public Education Foundation researched, printed and disseminated *Common Cents: An Independent Guide to Metro Schools Budget*, providing reader-friendly information about how the school system spends taxpayer dollars and demystifying the financial jargon that confuses the public.

Providing more and better information is a task to which LEFs are deeply committed. Many LEFs have hired additional staff to research educational issues and communicate more frequently with the public. In doing so, we recognize that a better-educated public is more able and willing to explore the roles it can assume in helping disadvantaged children in their communities. Last school year, the Bridgeport (Connecticut) Public Education Fund provided grants and assistance to 11 schools that participated in the *Neighborhood School Conversation Project*. These moderated conversations have enabled teachers, counselors, parents, and other members of the school community to start an open, constructive dialogue about school improvement.

Yet, with all of the impressive programs that LEFs are undertaking, I believe that we are only beginning to realize the potential of LEFs as engines of community involvement. LEFs are the perfect organizations to reach out—both to other groups and to each other to help rebuild the social capital in communities across this nation.

Every community across this land is concerned about the quality of its public education system. If we are to give poor and minority children in America the opportunity they both need and deserve, we must join the isolated interests and concerns of Americans into a common and shared cause to build a movement—not unlike the civil rights movement of the 1960s. And we should take a lesson from that movement.

Civil rights leaders realized that racial equality was not just a Southern issue—it was every American's issue. And, the leaders seized the opportunity to build social capital around this issue by reaching out to other Americans who understood fairness and opportunity and embraced this noble cause. The point is that when the rest of the nation began to consider Birmingham's problem and Selma's problem *its* problem, the civil rights movement was infused with the energy and resources of an entire nation. And, on that basis the battle was waged and won. We could not have a better lesson to guide our footsteps in the years ahead.

Public institutions are governed by consent of the people. Without that consent, no institution can govern justly or effectively. This is as true for public education as it was for public accommodations such as restrooms, public buildings, and public transportation. Today, our challenge is to reconnect Americans with the most vital public institution—public education. We are reminded that people cannot consent to an institution they don't know and don't understand, and in too many communities this is the case.

LEFs are the "window" through which a local community sees and hears what is happening in its schools, the reforms that are being initiated, and the expectations that are articulated for students and adults. Now, more than ever, the nation's poor and disadvantaged children need more LEFs in more communities to keep them informed and offer a vehicle for their participation.

Over the next several months, the Public Education Network (PEN) will be undertaking three activities to raise both the scope and the profile of our network, and help encourage the kind of dialogue in every community that advances quality public education by building public knowledge and understanding.

First, PEN has formed a partnership with *Education Week* that includes a national survey of Americans on the subject of community involvement in public education. I believe that the information gathered in this survey will offer important insights on how the public views its role and what factors create, obstruct, or discourage the public from getting more involved. Under our partnership, this national survey will be conducted each year for the next five years. The first survey will be released in February.

Second, just as civil rights leaders "nationalized" their movement, so too must we. This is precisely why PEN is ambitiously targeting 56 communities across the country for establishing new LEFs. In many of these cities and towns, we will explore granting LEF status to fledgling groups that are independent, supportive of wide-ranging reforms, and broadly representative of their communities. Our goal is to have at least one LEF in each of our 50 states.

Third, the results from the national survey will help to launch PEN's *National Campaign for Public Education*. This will be a national effort that is focused on drawing attention to the needs, issues, and best practices of public schools around the country. In the course of this campaign, PEN will stress the importance of maintaining the valued role of public schools in our democratic society. The campaign's activities will help to put the work of individual LEFs in the spotlight.

This is PEN's resolve: to cast our net wider and to reach even deeper into communities. Robert Putnam's book reminds us that harnessing social capital isn't easy—but it's absolutely critical, especially if our schools are to succeed.

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