Public-Private Partnerships, Civic Engagement, and School Reform

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What we know to do far exceeds what we are free to do.
—James Moffett (1994, p. 589)

The number of partnerships between public schools and private organizations increased dramatically after the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) issued its report, *A Nation at Risk.* Prior to 1983, only 17% of the elementary and secondary schools in the United States had been engaged in these collaborative ventures. By 1989, the figure had increased to 40% (Marenda, 1989); by 1991, businesses alone were engaged in more than 140,000 partnerships with schools (Rigden, 1991); and by 2000, it was estimated that several hundred thousand businesses were collaborating with schools (Partners in Education, 2000). Moreover, The Council for School & Corporate Partnerships (n.d.) reports that collaborating businesses have contributed an estimated $2.4 billion to aid schools. These statistics are undeniably impressive and suggest that alliances between public schools and private organizations have been highly productive. In truth, however, there is little empirical evidence supporting the contention that public-private partnerships have improved student learning; and at the same time, these ventures have sparked consequential questions about the critical nature of democratic localism and civic volunteerism in school reform.

In this essay, I propose an uncommon perspective of public-private partnerships in the United States—one that calls for direct citizen involvement to ensure that collaboration is linked to and compatible with reform efforts carried out at the local (school district) level. The need for a new

conceptualization is framed by three convictions: public-private partnerships have been largely ineffective in terms of improving instruction and student learning; democratic deficits in these ventures are incompatible with the concept of local control and potentially detrimental to school reform; and, civic engagement should become a normative standard for shaping, implementing, and evaluating school-improvement initiatives. In building a case for direct citizen involvement, I first examine partnerships in terms of motives, outcomes, and factors influencing success. Then civic engagement is defined and discussed in relation to public-private partnerships operating in the prevailing political environment found in most local school systems. Lastly, recommendations are made for addressing objectionable aspects of public-private partnerships.

Motives and Outcomes in Public-Private Collaboration

Conventionally, a partnership is a formal arrangement involving two or more parties intended to benefit all collaborators. Public-private partnerships specifically include associations between a governmental agency and either a private profit-seeking or private non-profit organization. Though public schools have been engaged in a variety of collaborative efforts with most being in the public-private class, the word, partnership, has not been defined precisely. As a result, it has been used indiscriminately to describe different levels of associations (Kowalski, 2008). Because of this indistinctiveness, generalizations about education partnerships have had limited value. Nevertheless, it is advantageous to understand why collaborators have been drawn to these projects, the extent to which the projects have achieved their goals, and the conditions that have affected goal achievement.

Motives

Many reasons underlie the popularity of public-private partnerships. From a societal perspective, citizens support these initiatives because they believe that an infusion of private capital into public education is socially and personally beneficial (Crow, 1998). Furthermore, they believe that corporate executives and school administrators have a positive influence on each other. This latter conviction is supported by policy literature suggesting that public institutions do some things better than private organizations and vice versa (Ghere, 1996). As examples, governmental institutions are thought to be more effective at generating public interest, providing stewardship, responding to social needs, and ensuring social justice; conversely, private organizations are thought to be better at developing creative solutions, generating

resources, applying technology, and producing managerial efficiency (Rosenau, 1999). Generally, supporters of public-private partnerships hope that the associations will modernize school administration as a result of superintendents and principals emulating the best attributes of the private sector (Woods & Woods, 2004).

During much of the previous century, school officials were less than enthusiastic about teaming up with external agencies and organizations—primarily because they accepted the bureaucratic tenet that such connections diminished technical efficiency (Hanson, 2003). Though this underlying assumption continued to be held by many educators during the past few decades (Davies, 2002), demands for reform and advocacy for public-private partnerships after 1983 basically trumped this reservation (Rist, 1990; Sipple, Matheney, & Miskel, 1997). Concurrently, school officials began recognizing that collaborating with high profile executives could enhance their social capital (Wang, Haertel, & Walbert, 1995)—an asset they could use to counteract public criticism. Therefore, most partnerships have been pragmatic ventures rather than associations nested in democratic values and beliefs (Merz & Furman, 1997).

The reasons why private organization executives elected to partner with schools have ranged from altruism to utilitarianism (Austin & Associates, 2004). Altruistic motives include intentions such as wanting to serve society, to improve the quality of community life, and to help educators and students succeed. Utilitarian motives, by comparison, include intentions such as wanting to influence public fiscal or curricular policy, to enhance corporate image, and to increase profits. Though public schools are considered to serve both public and private purposes (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990; Levin, 1987), critics of school-business partnerships (e.g., Abowitz, 2000; Boyles, 1998; Cromarty, 1997; Spring, 1998) contend that business executives have gotten involved in partnerships largely or exclusively to advance corporate interests—for example, to be able to advertise in or through schools. Hewitt (2007) posits that their overarching motive has been to establish consumption as the ultimate expression of participatory democracy. Exclusive vending rights agreements involving public schools provide compelling evidence to support his claim. Since 1980, thousands of districts and schools have given soft drink companies exclusive rights to sell their products; in return, schools are rewarded by receiving money or other forms of remuneration, such as athletic score boards (Addonizio, 2000). These transactional contracts have sparked both economic concerns, such as restricting competition, and ethical concerns, such as promoting unhealthy products to students (Kowalski, 2006).

The appropriateness and consequences of private businesses becoming involved in public education have been debated for nearly 100 years.

Noted historian, Raymond Callahan (1962), for example, concluded that captains of industry had a profound effect on public education as early as 1910. By manipulating school superintendents, they infused their values into school administration and curriculum—for example, by getting superintendents to accept scientific management and by getting schools to focus on workforce development. And though criticisms of corporate involvement in education have been prominent in the literature throughout the previous century, it is estimated that commercial activity in schools increased by 473% just during the 1990s (Molnar & Reaves, 2001). Defenders of public-private partnerships contend that despite their possible shortcomings, these projects have strengthened bonds between schools and citizens; and as a result, students, society, and businesses benefitted (Larson, 2002).

Outcomes

Many school partnerships were never evaluated to determine if they actually achieved their goals, and findings and conclusions for those that have are frequently questionable and misleading. The limited attention given to program evaluation is partially explained by collaborator indifference, especially their apathy toward determining the extent to which schools were being improved (Trachtman, 1994). In addition, four other issues either have prevented program evaluation or have made process exceptionally difficult.

1. Variation of association. As previously noted, partnerships involving schools have been dissimilar in nature and purpose. True partnerships are thought to have: (a) formal and legal standing (Smith & Wholstetter, 2006), (b) specific and mutually agreed upon goals (Barnett, Hall, Berg, & Camarena, 1999), and (c) equal or near equal authority and responsibility between or among partners (Lasley, Matczynski, & Williams, 1992; Tushnet, 1993). Evaluations of projects that fail to meet one or more of these criteria could produce misleading findings and conclusions.

2. Vague and immeasurable goals. Often partnerships were created quickly and little forethought was given to stating specific, measurable goals (Edens & Gilsinan, 2005). When this oversight occurred, success was treated as a relative term. As an example, a recent research report published by The Council for School & Corporate Partnerships (n.d.), an organization promoting public-private collaboration, claims that most school-business partnerships have and continue to be successful. Yet, no empiri-

cal data on either instructional changes or student learning are provided; the only relevant information appearing to support this conclusion is a finding that 87% of the school administrators surveyed were extremely satisfied or satisfied with the "ability" of their projects to meet intended goals.

3. Goal displacement. Goal displacement is a condition in which the means by which a goal is pursued becomes more important than the goal (Hanson, 2003). Dynamic social, economic, and political conditions make all school reform goals susceptible to displacement (Stone, Orr, & Worgs, 2006). The effect of this condition on program evaluation is demonstrated by a partnership between a university and local school districts. The project's espoused intent was to increase college readiness among minority and disadvantaged students. According to Laguardia (1998), the college officials deemed the partnership to be at least somewhat successful even though data clearly indicated that student retention and graduation rates had not improved. For the college officials, sustaining the partnership apparently became more important than improving student readiness.

4. Focusing entirely or primarily on resource acquisition. When judged on the basis of this criterion, most partnerships appear to be doing well. As an example, many authors (e.g., Choin-Kenney, 1989; Crow, 1998; Edelstein, 1989; Gonsalves, 2003) contend that additional resources are essential to carry out reforms; and therefore, when these assets are received by schools, there is a tendency to conclude that they have improved school performance. Smith and Wohlstetter (2006), for example, wrote that partnerships had contributed to school improvement by "offering access to additional resources, expertise and knowledge" (p. 265). Experiences during the 1980s, however, indicate that added resources alone rarely elevate student learning (Kirst, 1988).

Logically, the extent and quality of school-improvement should be determined either by value-added effects on student learning or by instructional changes that improve the probability of student social and intellectual growth (Davies, 2002). One of the few studies examining the latter criterion was conducted by Miron and Wimpelberg (1989) in a very large urban district. Seeking to determine if school-business partnerships had contributed to school reform, they found that only 8 of 450 projects had produced any instructional changes. More recently, Gelberg (2007) concluded that resources acquired through partner-

ships—assets such as pre-packaged curricula, additional equipment, and improved facilities—rarely if ever made a difference in the day-to-day lives of students. Moreover, dependency on private funds can result in unanticipated negative consequences. For example, private funding may make local and state officials less inclined to increase public funding (Fege & Hagelshaw, 2000).

Some research on public-private partnerships suggests that fears about possible exploitation are warranted. The potential for abuse arguably increased after the primary locus for reform became districts and schools. School-improvement in districts and schools is de facto a conflict-ridden process because power is distributed (usually unequally) among individuals, groups, and organization possessing dissimilar education values and interests (Datnow, 2000). Thus, partnerships can be exploited by power elites seeking to influence policy decisions in areas such as school reform and corporate taxes (Mickelson, 1999). And when school officials and corporate executives forge reforms in isolation, stakeholders are unable to identify, evaluate, and challenge their objectives (Taylor, 2000).

Some partnerships appear to have been transactional agreements; that is, school officials were expected overtly or covertly to return favors. Zimmer, Krop, and Brewer (2003), for example, found that the acquisition of resources typically required principals to engage in "reciprocal relationships with private sponsors" (p. 512).

Limiting Factors

Common pitfalls associated with school partnerships have been widely addressed in the literature. The most frequently identified difficulties have included inadequate planning (Gardner, 1990), inflexible goals (MacDowell, 1989), distrust among collaborators (Fisler & Firestone, 2006; Lieberman, 1986), competing organizational goals (Kowalski, 1993), and unresolved conflict (Dallmer, 2004). Though relevant, these problems do not explain fully why many partnerships have not improved student learning. The following are other issues that may be relevant to this limitation.

• *Focusing on resources and not student learning*. Scholars (Goodwin & Dean, 2008; Fullan, 2001, 2007; Murphy, 1991) note that would-be reformers frequently erred by focusing on characteristics of low-performing schools rather than the underlying causes of low performance. In this vein, persons controlling partnerships also may have erred by assuming that the reduction of school resource deficits would de facto elevate school performance. As Kirst (1988) correctly pointed out, fiscal intensification is not a reform but rather support for reform initiatives.

• *Having collaborators from incompatible organizational cultures*. Analyzing school-business partnerships, Abowitz (2000) found that the incompatible interests and intentions of the collaborating organizations often produced intense conflict, power struggles, and manipulation. Business executives and educators not only embrace different values and beliefs (Goodwin & Dean, 2008; LeDoux & McHenry, 2008), both groups typically are unprepared to join forces to produce school reform (Epstein & Sanders, 2006).

• *Ignoring intangible assets*. Business executives frequently did not recognize or elected not to capitalize on intangible assets, such as first-hand knowledge of classroom problems and creative curricular and instructional ideas, possessed by educators (Goodwin & Dean, 2008).

• *Failing to tailor reforms*. Partnerships frequently focused on generic reform ideas and not the specific needs of a district or school (Wohlstetter & Smith, 2006).

• *Ignoring the micropolitical context.* Though conflict between partners has been addressed extensively in the literature, far less attention has been given to the dynamics between partnerships and community interest groups (Firestone & Fisler, 2002). In many school districts, pressure groups still exert considerable influence but the extent to which their power is affected by public-private partnerships is basically unknown. Likewise, the degree to which partnerships have eroded public values and the spirit of local control remains undetermined (West & West, 2004).

• *Having democratic deficits*. Whenever public policy is developed in a vacuum, democracy and equity emerge as legitimate concerns because citizens are unable to pursue their individual rights (Miraftab, 2004). In the case of public-private partnerships, collaborators often wrongly assumed that persuading others to support their initiatives was the same as democratically involving citizens in crafting reforms (Gold, Cucchiara, Simon, & Riffer, 2005). Descriptions of failed reforms (e.g., Brandt, 1998; Frahm, 1994) reveal that citizens who feel disempowered have been able to scuttle change initiatives, even those that were highly defensible and obviously needed.

Civic Engagement and School Reform

Civic engagement is a liberty-based concept through which persons exercise authority and power in relation to governmental decisions (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). Scholars have long sought to comprehend conditions under which citizens seek to influence public policy; however, conducting research on this topic has been challenging due to dynamic, intricate, and difficult to validate circumstances surrounding it (Cooper, Bryer, & Meek, 2006). Even so, the literature validates stakeholder influence in a democracy is a fundamental right (e.g., Fishkin, 1991; Levin, 1999; Roberts, 1997; Skocpol, 1993) and provides consensus that direct citizen participation locally is advantageous to school reform politically and economically (e.g., Bauman, 1996; Christman, 2003; Duke, 2004, 2008; Mediratta, 2007; Sanders, 2003; Warren, 2005).

Decline of Democratic Localism

Public education's governance structure is most accurately described as representative democracy, a form of government in which school board members in conjunction with professional administrators make decisions on behalf of the local communities. Prior to World War II, school district residents could and often did impose their values and political dispositions on policy decisions directly through a process known as democratic localism (Katz, 1971). Town hall meetings, for example, provided forums in which stakeholders could exercise authority and power. Though multiple factors led to the demise of democratic localism after 1950, six were especially influential.

1. Progressive reforms. Beginning in the early decades of the 20th century, a reform movement was initiated to make the administrative arms of government more efficient, scientific, and managerial. The movement was premised on convictions that citizen involvement should be limited to important elections and citizens should leave the administration of government to elected officials and competent appointees (Cooper et al., 2006). Incrementally, board members and superintendents began making decisions for the community rather than making them with the community (Knezevich, 1984).

2. Loss of political capital. The loss of power that previously enabled citizens to influence school policy was symptomatic of a broader societal change that diminished political participation across both public and private organizations. Even the percent-

age of citizens actively involved in churches and labor unions declined after 1950 (Putnam, 1995).

3. Growing mistrust of government. As early as the 1960s, it was apparent that the interests of many citizens were not being addressed adequately by either elected officials or professional administrators. Citizens feeling disenfranchised often became dissatisfied with their governmental representatives (Lan, 1997), and they no longer trusted them to make decisions on their behalf (Nye, Zelikow, & King, 1997).

4. Personal withdrawal. After World War II, the population in the typical community and school district became less homogeneous; and as a result, conflict among stakeholder groups having different and often competing philosophies became common. In this political context, many who did not want to become embroiled in controversial issues opted to remain silent (Hodgkinson, 2002).

5. School district consolidation. From 1937 to 2000, the number of local school districts in the United States declined from approximately 119,000 to less than 15,000 (*Digest of Education Statistics*, 2002). The decrease was due almost entirely to school district consolidation. These mergers, often required or strongly encouraged by state government, were intended to produce economies of scale (Gordon & Knight, 2005) and to ensure that all students had access to a reasonably comprehensive curriculum delivered by qualified teachers (Knezevich, 1984). As local districts got larger, however, citizens had fewer opportunities to influence policy decisions.

6. Legal protection of adequacy and equality. During the last half of the previous century, adequacy and equality issues were litigated in most states as a result of plaintiffs challenging the constitutionality of state funding formulas for public schools. Judicial rulings in these matters directly and indirectly promoted greater state influence (centralization) and less local influence in setting policy (Guthrie, Springer, Rolle, & Houck, 2007; King, Swanson, & Sweetland, 2003).

Representative Democracy and School Reform

In a representative democracy, citizen engagement is indirect; that is, it serves as a complement or supplement and not a primary decision-making format (Pratchett, 1999). In a postindustrial society,

direct citizen participation was considered impractical both because the growing complexity of public administration required technical, political, and administrative expertise that most citizens did not possess (Dahl, 1989) and because most citizens could not or would not devote the time required to make important decisions (Roberts, 2004). In the realm of public elementary and secondary education, acceptance of representative democracy was premised on two expectations: the demographic profiles of school boards and local communities would be similar, and both board members and administrators would make impartial decisions benefitting the community rather than political interest groups (Meier, 1993). Dissatisfaction with public schools voiced after 1980 implied that one or both assumptions were not being met (Bauman, 1996; Lan, 1997).

Between 1983 and 1988, state policymakers, in counsel with business elites, took command of school reform. Convinced that educators either could not or would not act independently to improve schools (Metz, 1990; Rubin, 1984), they relied on a political-coercive change strategy and intensification tactics. Most notably, state policymakers elevated resources and required students and educators do more of what they were already doing (Kirst, 1988). Finn (1991) described this conceptualization of school reform as "simple, uniform, universal, and abrupt" (p. 42). But after a few years, the would-be reformers realized their efforts were only moderately successful (Hawley, 1988), partly because they had disregarded variations in real student needs (Passow, 1988) and partly because they had underestimated the power of teachers to circumvent mandates (Fullan, 2001; Hall & Hord, 2001). Concurrently, fiscal intensification, e.g., increasing state funding and raising starting teacher salaries, had little discernible effect on school performance (Kirst, 1988).

Circa 1990, policymakers in a number of states shifted the locus of reform to the local level, made school officials accountable for school improvement (Henkin 1993; Murphy, 1994), and mandated that stakeholders be involved in local reforms (Louis, Tool, & Hargreaves, 1999). According to Weiler (1990), the new strategy was based on the concept of directed autonomy. Specifically, state officials (a) set broad improvement goals, (b) gave districts leeway to determine how the goals would be met, (c) conducted periodic progress evaluations, and (d) then held local officials accountable for outcomes. This arrangement required school board members and administrators to determine *what* needed to be done to improve schools; previously they only were required to determine *how* they would implement federal and state mandates (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2007).

Developing and implementing reforms locally, however, is exceedingly complex and difficult; because, critical choices must be made at

the point where societal rights intersect directly with individual rights (Levin, 1999). Individual rights relate to the experiences, influences, and values parents want expressed to their children in local schools; societal rights relate to the experiences, influences, and values society wants reproduced through a common public school curriculum (Gutmann, 1987). In a representative democracy, conflict between individual and societal rights also is exacerbated by (a) citizen dissatisfaction with governmental officials (Levin, 1999), (b) a proclivity of disgruntled citizens to rely on confrontation to advance their interests (Björk & Gurley, 2005; Björk & Keedy, 2005), and (c) pervasive tensions between professionalism and democracy that result in seemingly contradictory expectations for public administrators (Cooper et al., 2006; King & Stivers, 1998). In the realm of public schools, both administrators (Wirt & Kirst, 2005) and teachers (Zeichner, 1991) are expected to make important decisions based on professional knowledge—but to do so while remaining subservient to the will of the people.

Civic Engagement Approaches

According to Cooper and associates (2006) civic engagement is most accurately described when analyzed across five dimensions: *involvement* (the size, depth and diversity of participation), *initiation* (persons or groups responsible for igniting participation), *purpose* (motivation and goals), *location* (political arena such as state or local level), and, *approach* (participation method or process). Focusing on the last dimension, St. John and Daun-Barnett (2008) described three ways citizens could be involved in school reform: the *adversarial approach*, the *electoral approach*, and the *communicative approach*.

The adversarial approach is based on the assumption that pressure groups pursue their interests most effectively by politically confronting governmental officials (Cooper et al., 2006). As an example, parents and other stakeholders contesting curricular proposals, such as teaching sex education or the theory of evolution, often elect to politically oppose incumbent board members and publicly criticize administrators. Though adversarial tactics can produce beneficial change, more often they destroy or damage relationships between school officials and stakeholder groups (Feuerstein, 2002). In their seminal research on the politics of public education, Lutz and Iannaccone (1978) found that confrontations initiated by pressure groups frequently led to organizational instability—characterized initially by the defeat of incumbent board members, subsequently by the dismissal of superintendents, and ultimately by internal institutional volatility.

The electoral approach to civic engagement also has been prevalent

in public education; school board elections and tax referenda are primary examples (Edelman, 1985). Though widely deployed and accepted as an efficient democratic procedure, relying on elections to ensure civic engagement is a dubious decision because many citizens fail to exercise their right to vote (Feuerstein, 2002; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1978; Wirt & Kirst, 2005). In some communities, for example, 90% of eligible voters have failed to cast a ballot in school board elections (Grossman, 2005). Moreover, elections are expensive and they may actually discourage more effective forms of citizen participation.

The communicative approach entails deliberative democracy—a concept expressed by the belief that "candid, two-way communication, especially the exchange of ideals that could radically alter the organization of public schools, is foundational to school reform" (St. John & Daun-Barnett, 2008, p. 66). With this alternative, stakeholders, encouraged by superintendents and other school officials (Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski & Keedy, 2005), state and then test their opinions in an effort to reach consensus (Medearis, 2005). The method is characterized by (a) open and candid dialogue, (b) joint action, and (c) shared commitment and responsibility (Cooper et al., 2006; Etzioni, 1993; Fishkin, 1991). Though the communicative approach is the most democratic alternative, it also is the most contentious and inefficient.

Improving Public-Private Partnerships

In the realm of school reform, public-private partnerships that transferred private resources to schools and infused managerial ideas into public policy were commonly deemed successful (Rosenau, 1999). Increasingly, this perspective is being challenged by the conviction that not all partnerships are beneficial or even benign. This fact is most apparent in several European countries where concerns about the detrimental effects of democratic deficits and about potential exploitation have led to federal policy regulating public-private partnerships (Sorensen & Torfing, 2005).

Governmental Mandates
Concurrently promoting public-private partnerships and recognizing the detrimental effects of democratic deficits in them, federal officials in the United Kingdom (U.K.) began mandating direct citizen engagement through neighborhood regeneration initiatives enacted in 1997. Programs such as the English Local Strategic Partnerships supposedly ensured citizen influence in collaborative efforts involving public local agencies, business, and community groups (Johnson & Osborne, 2003).

Commonly referred to as democratic networking, the connections are intended to give local residents the capacity to participate and remain engaged in the hopes that partnerships will endure (Diamond, 2004). Fundamentally, the mandate requires a communicative approach to civic engagement. Several authors (e.g., Skelcher, 2005; Sorensen & Torfing, 2005) believe that communities empowered by mandated democratic networks can address democracy and equity issues sufficiently.

Not all scholars, however, have a positive opinion of mandated democratic networks. Davies (2007), for example, argues that the U.K. law neither produced acceptable levels of direct citizen participation nor prevented projects from evolving into bureaucratic endeavors—projects in which public managers continued to emphasize efficiency over power sharing. Lamenting what he calls "creeping managerialism" (p. 796) in U.K. public-private partnerships, he proposes that a confrontational approach to civic engagement is more likely to empower citizens and to result in strong independent community groups capable of challenging public managers and private collaborators.

Proposed Change in the United States

In light of their potential to limit civic engagement and to result in exploitation, we must ask why public-private partnerships have not been scrutinized more carefully in this country. The inattention may stem from school officials and stakeholders believing that private resources de facto improve school performance. It also may stem from a conviction that collaboration is politically advantageous, essentially harmless, and actually a goal rather than a means to a goal (Bruner, 1991). In truth, private resources can improve the ecology of schools (e.g., facilities and equipment) but there is little evidence that these improvements directly affect student learning. In addition, some public-private partnerships have been controversial and possibly counterproductive with respect to directly involving citizens in school reform.

When all the facts are considered, the need to question the merit of partnerships as a reform tactic is axiomatic. In deliberating the true value of these ventures, we should ask and answer four essential questions.

1. Why is democratic participation philosophically appropriate? More than 150 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville described American democracy as being rooted in civic voluntarism, including active involvement in schools through political participation (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Effective local control still depends on citizen having opportunities to influence important policy decisions (Cunningham, 2003); and denying persons their

right to be heard is inconsistent with democratic principles (Hann, 2008). In a representative democracy, however, sharing authority and responsibility becomes a value-based decision. That is, elected officials and public administrators convey a value position when they decide matters affecting citizen participation. This value position expresses a conviction "about who deserves power and who does not, who will always have to struggle for power and who will not and most importantly who gets to 'steer' and who does not" (Kennedy, 2003, p. 57). The right to engage in deliberative discourse does not mean, however, that self-interests should never be suspended to serve societal interests (Roberts, 1997).

2. Why is democratic participation politically advantageous for school reform? Analyzing civic engagement, Box (1998) identified three categories of citizens: (a) "freeriders," passive persons content having others making decisions for them; (b) "watchdogs," persons periodically involved and engaged in political action based on the extent to which an issue is deemed personally relevant; and (c) "activists," persons deeply involved in public life and consistently engaged in political action (pp. 73-74). Though activists generally constitute less than 10% of a community's population (Verba et al., 1995), their influence can be considerable—especially when they are supported politically by watchdogs. In the case of school reform, philosophical and political diversity virtually ensures that any proposed initiative will be opposed by a segment of the community (Stone et al., 2006). And even in a representative democracy, citizen activism can derail school-improvement initiatives.

3. Why not eliminate public-private partnerships? Eliminating public-private partnerships because of their imperfections would be reckless for several reasons. First, public support for these ventures always has been high (Gittell, 1994; Rosenau, 1999; Shipps, 1998); and, doing away with them would almost certainly result in political problems for school boards and superintendents. Second, school-business partnerships have infused a considerable amount of private capital into public education, and though the effects of these funds in the past are debatable, the need for philanthropy to support future reforms is not (Gelberg, 2007). Third, public-private partnerships can elevate the social capital of school officials, an asset critical to pursuing reform locally (Wang et al., 1995).

4. Why not mandate civic engagement? To this point, mandating civic engagement (e.g., as in the U.K.), has not resolved democracy and equity concerns in public-private partnerships (Davies, 2007), and some scholars (e.g., Perrons & Skyer, 2003) question whether government mandates can ever achieve authentic democratic processes. Though coercion enforced with sanctions produces compliance, choice and commitment are more likely to result in education excellence (Kelly, 1999)—and they are more likely to foster legitimate democratic processes in local communities (Kowalski et al., 2007).

Based on the preceding perspectives, three recommendations are offered for improving public-private partnerships. First, they should be designed to be both practical (e.g., focused on improving school performance) and philosophical (e.g., promoting and protecting civic engagement) initiatives. This dual purpose would help prevent partnerships from operating as independent reform initiatives unaccountable to stakeholders. Second, rather than resorting to government mandates to eradicate democratic deficits, the education profession and local communities should embrace civic engagement as a normative standard for partnerships and school reform activities. This alternative is compatible with the spirit of civic voluntarism and with maintaining local control through the selective application of democratic localism. Third, all public-private partnerships should have an accountability component that requires the relevance of and progress toward project goals to be evaluated annually. In addition to assessing specific school-improvement objectives, program evaluations should examine the extent to which (a) democratic localism is encouraged and tolerated in relation to school reform, (b) social capital is accumulated, (c) relevant resources are acquired, and (d) exploitation is avoided.

Final Thoughts

Based on statistics, one could conclude that public-private partnerships are more fashionable now than at any time in the past. Yet, they often have been poorly configured and managed (Edens & Gilsinan, 2005); they rarely have lived up to their reform rhetoric (Gelberg, 2007); they have made public schools more vulnerable to exploitation (Abowitz, 2000; Boyles, 1998, 2001); and, they typically have operated with democratic deficits (Miraftab, 2004). Yet, surprisingly little attention has been given to challenging the popular conviction that they have contributed to school reform.

Among the concerns addressed here, democratic deficits are especially

troubling because they are philosophically unacceptable and arguably a barrier to direct citizen involvement. Most authors who have analyzed the political and philosophical dimensions of school reform (e.g., Bauman, 1996; Duke, 2004, 2008; Fullan, 2001, 2007) agree that stakeholders need to be involved more directly in critical activities, such as shaping visions, developing strategic plans, and formulating school-improvement policy. Therefore, partnerships are more effective when public schools are viewed as belonging to local communities (Decker & Decker, 2003) and when citizens are treated as owners (stakeholders) rather than as clients or subjects (Vigoda, 2002).

Protracted efforts to improve schools, most recently at the local level, help us understand why engaging in representative democracy through traditional bureaucracy is philosophically inappropriate and operationally counterproductive. Denied opportunities to pursue their individual rights, citizens, including some who are normally passive, become confrontational (Levin, 1999). Though the confrontational approach occasionally has been deployed successfully to pursue individual rights, this civic engagement alternative can be detrimental to public education. The typical community in the United States, and hence typical local school district, is characterized by an uneven distribution of power, philosophical dissonance, and demographic diversity (Kathi & Cooper, 2005). Under these conditions, confrontational tactics almost always contribute to community fragmentation and institutional (school district) destabilization (Alsbury, 2003).

The proposal for improving public-private partnerships articulated here is grounded in the beliefs that eliminating democratic deficits decreases the probability of exploitation and increases the probability that partnerships will have a positive influence on the social and intellectual development of students. The approach we adopt to eliminate democratic deficits is equally important. Given the long history of civic voluntarism and local control in this country, mandating civic engagement is paradoxical and encouraging political confrontation is divisive. Therefore, leaders in the education profession in concert with local school boards and other elected officials should promote direct citizen participation as a normative standard and explain publicly why it is an essential element in public-private partnerships.

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