

May 14, 2001

# **Theory of Action**

**Public Engagement for Sustained Reform**

**PUBLIC  
EDUCATION  
NETWORK**

Public involvement. Public education. Public benefit.

**Our Vision**

Every day, in every community, *every* child in America benefits from a quality public education.

**Our Mission**

To build public demand and mobilize resources for quality public education for *all* children through a national constituency of local education funds and individuals.

**Our Guiding Values**

- Public education is fundamental to a democratic, civil, prosperous society.
- Public schools are critical institutions for breaking the cycle of poverty and redressing social inequities.
- Education reform must be systemic to be effective.
- Public engagement, community support, and adequate resources are essential to the success of public education.
- Independent community-based organizations must play a central role in building and sustaining broad support for quality public education and for achieving significant reform in the nation's public schools.
- Parents and caregivers should be involved in all attempts to improve public schools.

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## INTRODUCTION

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For schools to sustain improvement — and, ultimately, for the public to take back responsibility for the quality of public schools — the Public Education Network (PEN) believes that the public must be more fully engaged in deciding on the right policies for its public schools and must be vigilant in ensuring that these policies are appropriately applied.

**PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT + SPECIFIC SCHOOL REFORM GOALS =  
SUSTAINED POLICY AND PRACTICE  
and  
THE PUBLIC TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

PEN proposes this “theory of action” to describe **public engagement** efforts that can help accomplish these goals. We define **public** to include three distinct audiences: the public at large, organized stakeholder groups, and policymakers. And we define **engagement** to include three distinct strategies: community organizing, community-wide strategic planning, and advocacy. Local Education Funds (LEFs) will facilitate these efforts and test this theory by employing these strategies to address three school reform issues: Standards and Accountability, Teacher Quality, and Schools and Community.

## PEN’S THEORY OF ACTION

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The Public Education Network is launching a bold initiative designed to increase public responsibility for public schools—the degree to which the public explicitly demands high quality schools. We believe that, without this public demand, too many schools wallow in low expectations and failure. The connection between the public and their schools is especially tenuous and strained in far too many urban school districts. This situation is intolerable: public education must give every child the opportunity to succeed. Restoring public responsibility and involvement is critical to the future of public education in this country.

LEFs will lead this pioneering effort in communities across the country. LEFs are independent, credible voices for better public schools in their communities. Working both with community leaders and members of the public, LEFs will facilitate the development of a community-wide vision for local schools, and they will pursue this vision by helping to foster community responsibility inside and outside of schools.

Our theory of action proposes a proactive concept of public engagement. By “public engagement,” we mean more than simply providing information and inviting people to offer their opinions.

Rather, we believe that public engagement must enlist the public directly in formulating the policies to be carried out locally. We define the public as including three distinct audiences: the

public at large, organized stakeholder groups and policymakers. And we specify three strategies for reaching these audiences: community organizing, community-wide strategic planning and advocacy.

Over the four-year course of this effort, PEN will evaluate progress, learning what engagement activities are most effective in what situations. We'll look for different segments of the population to get involved in new or more powerful ways that impact student learning.

By doing this work, we think that we can help create communities that care about the quality of their schools, that take action to support their schools, and that feel engaged and connected to the work of their schools. The result will be better outcomes for students and healthier communities that work together to solve problems.

## WHY GOOD PUBLIC SCHOOLS MATTER

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Public education is essential to a vibrant democracy, a healthy economy and a pluralistic society. In the United States, public education is the primary institution we have to position each successive generation to participate in our democracy. The knowledge and actions those generations bring will determine the priorities we set as a society — our very quality of life.

In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam argues that community disconnectedness is creating a series of fault lines that threaten to deter us from building the “social capital” necessary to address common problems. PEN believes that this “community disconnectedness” infects too many urban school districts in particular.

For public education to survive and thrive, the public must support the vital roles of public schools. Good public schools exist when the public plays an active role ensuring a high-quality education for every child.

## WHY PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

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The past two decades have witnessed a litany of programs and strategies to improve schools and increase student achievement – all with limited success. Sustained, large-scale improvements have not happened. But today's renewed focus on accountability, academic achievement and widening gaps among various student populations puts the focus back where it needs to be: what will it take for every child to meet high expectations?

In areas where schools are failing and students aren't succeeding, community pressure for improvement needs to be explicit and vocal.

Accountability needs to become a “public” affair with clear goals, clear expectations and clear consequences that all understand and act on. Accountability cannot be left too private, behind-the-scenes decision-making and deal cutting.

When a school system is no longer working, the public needs to demand accountability and take back its responsibility — which it has abdicated to school board and school employees — to exert a clear vision for what needs to change and how. In a well-functioning school system, the public *delegates* these responsibilities – maintaining oversight of performance through

activities such as elections, school board meetings and school committees. When the public *abdicates* responsibility, its involvement in these activities dwindles, its active oversight ends, its authority wanes – and schools flounder.

Broad public involvement, and buy-in, to a reform agenda also avoids “policy churn” – the abrupt changes in policies and priorities that often accompanies the election or appointment of a new school district superintendent, school board members or state legislators and that stall progress. We believe that policy changes can be stabilized when the public is involved in clarifying the problem, diagnosing the causes, developing solutions and monitoring the impact. Instead of being held just by the superintendent, the vision for what the public wants its school system to look like is held by the community, which then votes for school board members who share that vision, who in turn hire a superintendent who shares that vision.

Unfortunately, we know this engagement work will be most difficult in communities where it is most needed. In low-income communities in particular, where students often have the furthest to go to meet new academic requirements, the public has become increasingly disengaged from its schools. Public indifference, disillusionment and sometimes-outright hostility between parents or other community members and educators is the result, and a focus on student learning is further compromised.

PEN is not alone in advocating for a greater focus on public engagement. Organizations such as the Cross City Campaign, the Education Trust, Public Agenda, Rethinking Schools and others share this agenda with us.

## **BUILDING PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY FOR BETTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

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Excellent schools are created when the community takes responsibility for excellence – when schools have the backing and involvement of their community. Recognizing this point, PEN’s concept of public engagement includes a commitment to engage multiple constituencies, from opinion leaders to the general, sometimes disenfranchised, public. We believe that when all constituencies in a community take responsibility for their public schools, not only will we see policy changes; we will also see a stronger civic infrastructure, increased capacity to solve problems, stronger economic status and citizens fully participating in a democratic society.

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It is important to bear in mind several core **assumptions** underlying this “equation”:

Sustained or consistent policy and practice will lead to better outcomes for kids, including increased student achievement.

“Policy” is defined broadly, ranging from the broad policy direction of standards-based reform to specific policies like the alignment of curriculum and professional development or tenure-based teacher assignment. Further, where policies at federal, state and local levels conflict, they must be brought into alignment. What is necessary is a series of consistent coherent policies operating at the local level.

Discussions about specific school reform goals and what actions are necessary to achieve those goals will lead to public plans and public decisions, with greater public accountability.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the range of “publics” engaged must be broad. Engaging only a faction of the public can undermine good policy agendas when that faction is not willing to do what is necessary to level the playing field for all students.

## IMPLEMENTING THE THEORY OF ACTION

PEN intends to ground this theory in real practice in real communities. While our experience suggests that public engagement can create an important breakthrough in school improvement efforts, we intend to test this theory, learn more about it and learn what works.

This theory of action will be used in the local implementation of three new national initiatives:

- Standards and Accountability: PEN seeks to establish systems by which communities hold their school systems and themselves accountable for ensuring that all children have the opportunity to achieve at high levels.
- Teacher Quality: PEN seeks to address the current inequitable distribution of qualified teachers across high-poverty school districts — where students now in need of greatest support to meet academic standards have the least support to do so. The initiative will seek to address recruitment, distribution and retention of qualified teachers to ensure a qualified teacher in every classroom.
- Schools and Community: PEN seeks to integrate public education with the community-based academic and nonacademic support programs (e.g., health, social, recreational, citizenship and youth development, tutoring, mentorship’s) that help all students achieve at high levels.

The initiative will seek to use models such as community schools, full-service schools and others, both to ensure that such programs are available and to invite the “public” back into the public schools as direct beneficiaries of available programs.

LEFs will implement this theory of action. PEN believes that LEFs are in a unique position to build and facilitate public engagement campaigns around these reform initiatives. LEFs bridge school district leaders and the public at large, and they can marry public policy with public

engagement strategies.

LEFs begin this work with a viewpoint – with concrete ideas for what reforms need to be implemented and with a conviction that public schools need to be strengthened. They are independent and credible advocates for change.

LEFs are being selected, through a competitive process, to participate in “cooperative agreements” with the PEN national office to apply these public engagement strategies to each of these content areas (an LEF will participate in only one of these initiatives — not all three).

## AUDIENCES

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LEFs will be asked to engage three distinct and separate audiences, defined as:

- The Public at Large: all residents of a community, including parents, school district employees and community members — especially those who traditionally have been excluded from community discussion or who may not truly be represented by an organized stakeholder group.
- Organized Stakeholder Groups: groups with an interest in education issues that are formally organized to represent others and wield influence with policymakers (chambers of commerce, parent-teacher associations, teacher unions, higher education institutions, the faith community, community-based civic organizations, etc.)
- Policymakers: elected and appointed officials with direct authority to make legislative or regulatory policy or to allocate resources for schools (legislators, governors, state school board members, chief state school officers, mayors, city councils, boards of education, superintendents, etc.).

## COMMON ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

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PEN’s theory of action identifies specific strategies for LEFs to use in reaching each of these three audiences:

1. **Community organizing for the public at large**: LEFs will sponsor grass-roots community organizing activities that give the public a chance to share their opinions, shape decisions and take responsibility for the success of new programs. Community organizing means “organizing the unorganized.” Through neighborhood meetings, house meetings and door-to-door visits, it reaches out to people not traditionally involved in community politics and then mobilizes these individuals to affect changes in local policies.

### ***Role of LEFs in Community Organizing***

PEN expects that LEFs would partner with local existing community-organizing entities such as ACORN, IAF, and others to undertake these activities, rather than doing this work directly themselves. However, specific activities that LEFs will undertake directly to reach the public at large include:

- Seeking input — through polling or community meetings — about the specific school reform issue to be addressed (standards and accountability, teacher quality, or schools and community services) and what information is needed to measure progress.
- Communicating about school reform strategies and what data shows about the quality of local schools. Communications helps galvanize members of the public to take action — by clarifying problems and leading to demand for solutions — and it lays the foundation for community-wide strategic planning. The goal is to help the community develop a clearer picture of what the school system looks like, its flaws and how it can be fixed.
- Training about ways parents and community members can get involved in schools and in implementing the community strategic plan.
- Encouraging people to take action to advocate for specific changes in school practice or policy.
- Reporting progress against the benchmarks in the strategic plan.

More than policymakers and stakeholder groups, members of the public at large are the individuals who feel the greatest disillusionment about and distance from their schools.

Community organizing is hard work — and is an area in which LEFs typically have had little experience. Groups such as ACORN, IAF, and others already have the expertise and experience organizing communities to accomplish similar goals.

2. **Strategic planning for stakeholder groups (and some members of the other two audiences):** LEFs will take the lead in convening and facilitating a community-wide process to develop a strategic plan for the public schools. The plan will create a broad community vision for what needs to be accomplished in schools, how changes will take place and who is responsible. The strategic planning process will be organized around the formal involvement of stakeholder groups and school district leaders, but also will be informed by the policymaking environment and direction from the public at large.

### ***LEF Role in Community-Wide Strategic Planning***

LEFs would directly undertake or oversee the following steps, which comprise the strategic planning process:

- Collecting data to answer questions posed by the community plus other questions developed with PEN about the issue (e.g., current efforts to address the gap between local student performance and state standards, the distribution of teachers in the district, or the range of support services available to students both in and outside of school).
- Facilitating the development of a strategic plan to address the gaps indicated by the data. This involves convening a wide variety of organized stakeholders (eg. the Chamber of Commerce, local university, Mayor’s office, school district, parent-teachers association, union representatives, community based organizations, other city government agencies) as well as policy makers and members of the public to determine what the community wants to do to address the gaps presented by the data. Each stakeholder offers what role they can play to address the gaps with a clear timetable and benchmarks for meeting each of these responsibilities. (Or, if the district already has a strategic plan, the work could involve refining this plan with public input or developing specific action steps for implementation.) Stakeholders should also anticipate what barriers or impediments to implementation of the plan they might encounter, and offer suggestions as to how they would address these.
- Implementing the plan with the LEF monitoring progress and coordinating with each stakeholder to ensure that action is taken where promised. LEFs can provide any needed support — such as convening meetings or identifying experts — and any necessary “prodding” to each stakeholder to implement each part of the plan. LEFs also should continue to communicate to the public about the goals and activities of the plan.
- Identifying legal or state policy barriers or opportunities, or inequities in resource distribution — these barriers to accomplishing the strategic plan goals serve as the basis for advocacy campaigns directed at legislatures, further community organizing and possible litigation.
- Evaluating the impact and making midcourse corrections: LEFs can facilitate a process by which the stakeholders come together regularly to evaluate not only whether they are meeting the benchmarks they laid out, but also whether these benchmarks are having the desired impact on the issue they are trying to address. Midcourse corrections must be made as warranted, as the work progresses.
- Reporting progress to the community both about progress against the benchmarks as well as progress in addressing the underlying issue. This should be done regularly. Reporting on progress against benchmarks should be done at least every quarter.

3. **Advocacy for policymakers:** LEFs will work with partner organizations to advocate with state policymakers to address barriers to implementation of the local strategic plan, or to take advantage of opportunities to accelerate its implementation or effectiveness.

### ***LEF Role in State Advocacy***

LEFs help to identify the state-level barriers and opportunities that become the fodder for state-level advocacy as part of the strategic planning process described above.

- LEFs work with local or state-level partner organizations to educate policy makers about these barriers and opportunities, and about the needs of poor children, and of the community. They can also include take positions on specific legislation, and/or urge others with similar views to do the same.

These three engagement strategies are intertwined and support each other. Community organizing helps develop a framework for the strategic plan. The planning process identifies added actions that community members can take and changes that policymakers must make, in addition to spelling out new programs in schools. Advocacy is a tool for helping to implement the plan and a way to more strongly involve the community in creating changes.

LEFs will need to bring these strategies together, being clear about what each segment of the public is expected to do and finding ways to hold parties accountable for progress.

## **UNCOMMON STARTING POINTS**

PEN recognizes that the situation — the degree of disengagement in the community, the success of current improvement efforts, the willingness of the school district to change — will vary dramatically in each location. Further, each LEF is structured differently and with a different relationship to its school district.

We also recognize that the actual public engagement work and activities will vary by community — as will the outcomes that can be expected. We think these different starting points offer fertile ground for learning about public engagement strategies that make a lasting difference in different environments.

## **LEF LEADERSHIP**

LEFs are uniquely positioned to do this work, and PEN views them as effective and essential leaders in their communities. Over the last two decades, LEFs have honed their ability to collect and analyze data, to convene diverse groups, and to broker resources. Indeed, the theory of action on paper is based on the experiences of LEFs in such communities as Grand Rapids, Wake County, Portland and Charlotte-Mecklenburg. LEFs represent the “community voice” and can leverage change with those who have power. They are independent – and thus credible and influential – voices for change. These unique attributes make LEFs ideal organizations to steer this public engagement work.

At the same time, we recognize that these expectations will push many LEFs in new ways, asking them to assume new roles within the community and new relationships with the school

district.

As LEFs use our theory of action they will need to build on their experience in these areas:

- engaging in public involvement and communications;
- balancing relationships with school district leaders who have aggressive demands for change;
- working closely with educators to create changes in the classroom;
- serving as a broker between different components of the community (opinion leaders and the public at large); and
- bringing various members of the community together and holding each accountable for contributing to progress.

The most important role LEFs will play will be as a wise leader in this process — bringing both political judgment and facilitation skills to the table. LEFs will need to win support for changes from school leaders, but also will need to help confront inertia within the system that impedes change. They will serve as brokers and “prodders” between different factions in a community and between the community and the school district — to ensure that progress is being made. Finally, LEFs will need to clearly define roles and what is expected — for themselves, for the school district, and for community members. We envision that some of the most difficult work LEFs will do is finding ways to overcome these hurdles, keep the public engaged, and maintain progress.

It also is clear that this work will require LEFs to collaborate with other organizations locally and across their states to support these efforts and supplement activities. For example — depending on the local situation and the needs identified — tackling policy issues related to teachers’ contract will require participation by the teachers’ unions. Development of state advocacy strategies will require collaboration with LEFs and/or other community-based organizations across the state. The LEF may play a “behind-the-scenes” instigator role for some of these strategies, while being out-front for others.

## OUTCOMES

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Public engagement as we’ve defined it is both an end and a means, and so we envision this effort resulting in two sets of outcomes.

- Content Outcomes: Each initiative envisions specific outcomes related to the topic undertaken (e.g., a qualified teacher in every classroom or a direct relationship between changed practice/policy and student achievement). While this may be too ambitious to expect to accomplish in the 3–4 years of the initiative itself, we can expect to see progress against a strategic plan designed to accomplish that goal.
- Public Taking Responsibility for Its Public Schools: Undertaking this process — no matter which of these initiatives is chosen — will require the public to take active responsibility for changing its public schools. We see this outcome lasting well beyond the end of the specific initiative to keep the community focused on both the issue tackled in this process and the

other issues related to school reform that will arise. PEN will look for evidence that each audience is more knowledgeable and more involved — and that underrepresented voices have been engaged.

A formal evaluation will examine the impact of our work in these two areas.

### ***Indicators of Progress***

While progress will take time, PEN expects that some indicators of progress will become apparent in this 3–4 year timeframe — even before content outcomes are obvious. These might include:

- new voices engaged
- changed community views regarding the issue and greater public understanding of the issue, as determined by polling or surveying
- more public concern/outrage over poor school performance
- more public reporting of data
- media coverage of education and achievement gap
- more effective ways of communicating to the public about school performance.
- more inquiries about individual school budgets
- increased public confidence in public schools
- more candidates running for school board and local councils
- greater voter turn-out in school board elections
- education is a major issues in electoral process
- increase in intermediate behaviors, which affect student achievement, e.g. parent involvement, attendance, etc.)
- adoption of new state or local programs to meet student needs
- policy changes resulting in greater opportunities to learn
- Indicators of increased public responsibility might include:
  - an independent base outside of the school with its own power and constituency;
  - a substantive education agenda, that involves serious work around school quality issues and working for real authority at the school level;
  - a leadership development strategy in place – community leaders always organizing and always building skills and confidence among new people;
  - data about school performance collected, monitored and used.
  - partnerships and relationships in place with educators;

As LEFs make progress toward these outcomes, PEN hopes to learn much about what is possible and, especially, what it looks like when a community truly does take responsibility for its schools.

## **LONG-TERM IMPACT**

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We know this public engagement work will be difficult work — and sometimes even a tough fight — and we know it will take a great deal of time. But we believe our theory of action will pay dividends for the thousands of children in low-performing schools where “business as usual” has been allowed to go on for too long. We know there is a need to assemble a powerful force on the side of change.

We intend to learn a great deal as LEFs use this theory of action, including what’s possible, how obstacles are overcome and how long it takes.

In the short-term, the LEFs’ work in this area will help communities develop more broadly held visions of what they want from their schools. This work will promote greater involvement and inform more effective actions.

But the greater objective — and longer-term goal — for this work is to create public demand for good public schools and to have this demand actually improve public schools. When we’re done, we envision communities with a substantive education agenda making real changes in student achievement. We envision a strong community voice outside the schools — with its own power and constituency — that argues for improvement and helps guide changes. We envision robust community organizations that always are in the process of building new leadership and sustaining involvement. And we envision an accountability system that places shared responsibility for success with everyone in the community.

Schools reflect their communities, and healthy communities have healthy schools.

### **Resources from Public Education Network**

*www.PublicEducation.org*

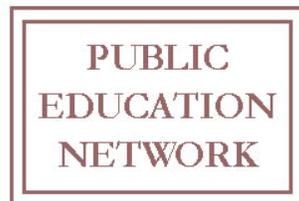
*Taking Responsibility: Using Public Engagement to Reform Our Public Schools* tells the story of how local education funds have strengthened democracy by working with their communities to structure, convene, and apply lessons learned from public engagement activities.

*Communities at Work* highlights strategic interventions used by local education funds to involve parents, business leaders, and a wide range of community members in education issues.

*A Community Action Guide to Teacher Quality* is designed to help communities arrive at a better understanding of teachers and teaching, and the community role in attaining high-quality teaching.

*The Voice of the New Teacher* looks at the needs of new teachers in the context of quality teaching.

*Using NCLB to Improve Student Achievement: An Action Guide for Community and Parent Leaders* highlights ways NCLB can be used to strengthen the public's voice in education, and increase community and parental involvement in school- and district-level operations and decisions.



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