CHAPTER 2

Social and Political Contexts

CASE STUDY: DIVERSITY AND LOCAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Western Heights is a suburb initially developed in the mid-1950s. Most residents initially were upper middle-class families. After 1980, however, the community's demographics began changing. Outmigration occurred as a result of affluent families relocating in more recently developed suburbs with more expensive homes. Between 1980 and 1990, 17% of the residential properties had changed ownership. Census data revealed that although the community's racial profile remained essentially the same (98% of the residents were white, non-Hispanics), the median family income had declined by 13%.

After 1990, outmigration accelerated, property values declined, and a majority of new residents were persons of color, predominately African American or Hispanic. According to 2000 census data, the community's population had declined by 3% over the previous decade, and only 78% of the residents were now reported as white, non-Hispanics. Over the same period, the median family income declined 23%. To this day, trends toward a larger racial minority and lower family median income continue. The most recent demographic projection completed by an independent consulting firm predicts that Western Heights will have a minority-majority as early as 2017.

Between 1980 and 2010, enrollment in the Western Heights Public Schools dropped by 14%. Over that same period, the percentage of African American students increased from 2% to 28%, the percentage of Hispanic students increased from less than 1% to 16%, and the number of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch programs increased from 1.5% to 13%. The demographic profile of the district's employees, however, changed very little; in 2010, 92% of the teachers and 100% of the administrators were white, non-Hispanics.

In 2008, two African American candidates defeated incumbent board members by a narrow margin in an election in which only 21% of the district's eligible voters went to the polls. They became the first non-white board members in the district's history. Following the election, they openly criticized the superintendent for not having employed persons of color in administrative and teaching positions. The superintendent, supported by the remaining three board members, explained that because of declining enrollments and few resignations, there had been few vacancies to fill since 2000. Eventually, the new board members also criticized the superintendent and principals for not communicating effectively with African American and Hispanic stakeholders. Within 6 months, the two new board members and three veteran board members were deeply divided on almost every issue.

As the 2010 school board election neared, the battle lines dividing the board members now extended across the entire community. The terms of two white board members were expiring, and both announced publicly that they would seek reelection. Shortly thereafter, the two African American board members announced that they were part of a newly created political action group dedicated to defeating the two incumbents. Composed primarily of African American and Hispanic residents, the group revealed its three goals: finding quality candidates to oppose the incumbents, raising

campaign funds for the candidates, and garnering public support for the superintendent's dismissal. One month before the election, the incumbent board members, joined by the third white board member, issued a press release claiming that a change of power on the school board would destabilize the community and public schools, cause many current administrators and teachers to retire or resign, and result in even more dramatic devaluations of residential property.

INTRODUCTION

In the last 50 years, the population in many cities and towns has become more diverse racially, ethnically, religiously, and economically. As a result, most communities and school districts are now divided politically, resulting in three notable conditions. First, conflict within districts and schools is now more pervasive and intense than in the past because stakeholder groups express and pursue different and often incompatible interests (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004; Levin, 1999). Second, philosophical and political dissonance virtually ensures that every initiative changing policy, curriculum, or procedures will be opposed by one or more stakeholder groups (Stone, Orr, & Worgs, 2006). Third, incessant conflict often destabilizes communities and public schools (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2007). Concurrently, however, school administrators are expected to initiate and facilitate collaborative efforts to forge visions and strategic plans for school improvement at the local level (Kowalski, 2010). To meet this challenge, administrators must be able to analyze local social and political conditions and use this knowledge to build and maintain positive relationships with all stakeholder groups.

This chapter describes primary social and political issues affecting public schools and posits that democratic and collaborative approaches to reform are both philosophically appropriate and institutionally effective. The goals are to explain how schools are affected by their communities, especially in terms of having to address traditional and evolving needs, and to demonstrate that locally driven reforms are dependent on political and economic support.

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Identify primary social issues that affect schools and students.
- Explain why positive relationships between educators and stakeholders facilitate efforts to address social problems.
- Identify primary political issues that affect schools.
- Explain why pervasive conflict and political dissonance affect school-improvement efforts.
- Describe why democratic and collaborative approaches to school improvement are advantageous.

SOCIAL CONDITIONS AND SCHOOLS

After World War II, dramatic and sweeping social changes altered the landscape of public education. In the early 1900s, the typical American community was rural, farm based, and homogeneous. The local public school was a center of community activity and most residents had children or grandchildren enrolled in this institution. Today's typical community is vastly different. It is larger, located in or near an urban area, and many community members—even neighbors—have never met each other. Instead of having a direct interest in local schools, many stakeholders feel alienated and view public schools as inefficient bureaucracies.

The ability of schools to identify and reduce the negative effects of social problems typically is enhanced by competent leaders who promote and facilitate civic engagement (Christenson, 1995; Peterson & Skiba, 2001; Weiss & Edwards, 1992). That is, they involve citizens in deliberative discourse, especially in relation to forging important policies at the local level. This demanding assignment requires administrators to know evolving social conditions and the education needs created by them.

Changing Family Structure

Whereas the community provides a broad base of support for schools, the family provides day-to-day interactions. The former has direct influence on overall school effectiveness and the latter has direct influence on individual student learning. During the span of 1970–1995, the percentage of children (defined as persons not institutionalized and under age 18) living in a single-parent home increased from 11% to 25%; the statistics are even more dramatic for students of color. In 1995, only 11% of white children lived in a single-parent family compared to 60% of African American children and 29% of Hispanic children (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). By 2004, the percentage of children living without both parents in the household increased slightly to 26%; and among this group, 88% lived in a fatherless family (Kreider, 2008).

The number of children living in dysfunctional families also increased; for example, an estimated 10%–20% of school-age children experience domestic violence each year (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2009). In addition to violence, problems such as chronic mental illness, drug addiction, alcoholism, or persistent physical illness contribute to conditions in which children are not cared for properly at home (Wherry, 2001). Students living in these conditions are not provided structure, behavioral expectations, health care, and skills needed to be successful in school (Jencks & Phillips, 1998); many of them eventually develop antisocial behaviors and fail academically (Edwards, 2001). Less recognized, children reared in dysfunctional families often influence peer behavior; for example, "a single disruptive student can negatively affect the outcomes for all other students in a classroom" (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2009, p. 63).

Poverty

From 1995 to 2001, the percentage of children living in poverty conditions increased from 20% to 28% (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004, p. 169)—and it is estimated that

over 40% of these children live in "extreme poverty" (Anyon, 2005, pp. 65–66). Noting the negative effects of poverty, Lewis (2004) pointed out that students living under these conditions

> have higher rates of lead poisoning, they go to bed hungry or ill fed more often, they move more frequently, they watch more television, and they have less access not only to adults who can read to them but also to those who can talk to them in intellectually enriching ways. (p. 100)

Moreover, economically disadvantaged students are more likely to drop out of school, have children who will attend low-performing schools, and also fail academically (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003).

Students of color in America are much more likely to live in poverty than are white students. In 2003, for example, 71% of Hispanic and 70% of African American students in the fourth grade qualified for free or reduced-price lunch programs compared to only 23% of white students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Reviewing research on the students living in poverty, Hardy (2005) highlighted two facts: the student poverty rates keep increasing and poverty is a primary factor in low student achievement.

Many social researchers claim that a new *social underclass*, separate from the traditionally defined *lower class*, developed during the 1990s (Jencks & Peterson, 1991); a significant percentage of this new underclass are students (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Underclass families often are unable to provide for their children adequately (Mayer, 1997) and they tend to be concentrated in urban areas where their children attend low-performing schools.

Immigrant Students

From 1990 to 2006, the number of immigrants in the United States rose from 20 million to more than 37 million (Urban Institute, n.d.). Many of these new residents were school-age children, some illegal aliens. In 2000, the Pew Hispanic Center estimated that 1.1 million preschool through 12th-grade students were illegal aliens and another 1.54 million were U.S.-born siblings of illegal aliens (Fix & Passel, 2003).

Three effects of immigration have received considerable attention: cost, accommodations, and academic achievement. Many urban districts, already lacking adequate resources, have had to absorb large numbers of immigrant students and tailor certain aspects of the curriculum to them. Additionally, school officials have had to devote time and money to determining whether immigrant children were entitled to be enrolled in public schools. Among those enrolled, not all have adapted well to American schooling. The academic progress of many Mexican American students, for example, has been hampered by their inability to communicate in English. The extent to which public schools have recognized immigrant student problems and provided assistance to overcome them has varied considerably (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000).

Effects of Social Problems on Student Behavior

Other problems found in schools, such as violence, illegal drugs, and gangs, are intertwined with the social issues already discussed and with each other. As an example, the availability

and use of illegal drugs have been linked to levels of violent behavior in high schools (e.g., Lowry, Cohen, & Modzeleski, 1999). Increases in violent behavior, therefore, are predictable as students get exposed to and begin using illegal drugs at earlier ages (McIntosh, MacDonald, & McKeganey, 2004). Gang membership not only elevates the probability of illegal drug use and violence, it contributes to unacceptable behaviors such as defacing school property with graffiti, bullying, weapon possession, poor attendance, and ultimately poor academic performance (Struyk, 2006).

Social problems create negative cycles and students caught in them often do not escape, particularly in communities and schools where the problems are pervasive. For example, unacceptable social behaviors usually result in out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and grade retention; in turn, these disciplinary or academic decisions increase the likelihood that affected students will not complete high school (Ramirez & Carpenter, 2009). The magnitude of concern over negative student behavior has been expressed in the No Child Left Behind Act, a federal law requiring states to identify persistently dangerous schools and to allow students trapped in them to transfer to safer schools.

Effects of Social Problems on Schools

Collectively, contemporary social problems have created two challenges for schools. First, they have diminished institutional effectiveness, especially in urban schools plagued by high crime rates and enrolling a high percentage of students living in poverty. Crime, violence, and other unacceptable behaviors not only make schools unsafe, they reduce the amount of time teachers teach and students learn. Unfortunately, many disgruntled stakeholders fail to recognize this fact when they complain about student achievement test scores. Second, social problems have created a need for additional programs, such as bilingual education, and additional personnel, such as social workers and psychologists. In addition to being costly, program enhancement as a reform initiative is controversial among stakeholders who believe that schools already waste the resources they are given (Howell, 2005).

POLITICAL CONDITIONS AND SCHOOLS

Until the last decades of the 20th century, educators and other stakeholders basically shared the same convictions about the mission of public schools and the preferred ways to operate and fund these institutions (St. John & Parsons, 2004). Even though citizens previously were divided with respect to giving precedent to social or economic goals, both sides typically were able to reach consensus regarding the need to support public education. Beginning in the 1980s, however, the gulf between opposing philosophical and political positions widened; as a result, school boards and administrators encountered disparate positions regarding the need to buttress public schools, especially in terms of providing them with additional public funding (Guthrie & Schuermann, 2010; King, Swanson, & Sweetland, 2003).

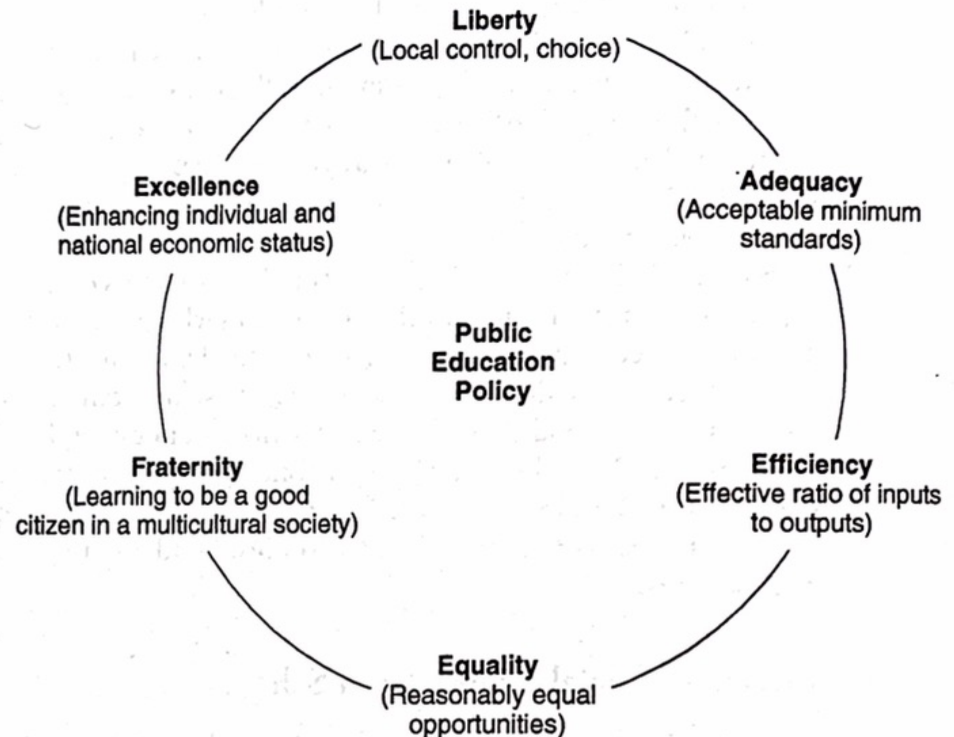

FIGURE 2–1
Public Education Policy Goals

Education Goals

From its inception, American public education has been shaped by deeply held values that get expressed as goals (Stout, Tallerico, & Scribner, 1994). Values are basically enduring beliefs about what is desirable (Razik & Swanson, 2001). Historically, education policy has been the product of constant interplay among four broad objectives: liberty, adequacy, efficiency, and equality. After 1960, however, the courts and policymakers began applying new definitions of equality; subsequently, two other values, fraternity and excellence, began influencing public policy (King et al., 2003). The six values are illustrated in Figure 2–1.

To appreciate the complexity of the current political environment, you need to understand the nature of these goals, the circumstances underlying their emergence, their effect on public education policy, and their effect on political behavior:

- *Liberty* is a deeply rooted principle in American society promoting "the right to act as one chooses" (Swanson, 1989, p. 274). From the colonial period forward, local communities created and operated schools; even before the common school movement started in the mid-19th century, communities opted to impose taxes to support local schools (Marsden, 1994). To this day, most citizens believe that some degree of local control of public education is beneficial.
- *Adequacy* is a complex principle that essentially answers the question, How much is enough? Even before 1900, some states began to implement a common school

curriculum that was intended to provide a comprehensive and adequate education for students (Wraga, 1992). As states assumed a role in setting adequacy standards and became involved in providing fiscal support to schools, tensions between liberty and adequacy began to emerge (Kowalski, 2003). Many protectors of local control objected to state interventions in local schools.

- *Efficiency* pertains to a relationship between inputs and outputs. In education, efficiency often is addressed through the concept of accountability (King et al., 2003). State officials and other stakeholders embraced the ideas that public funds should be managed judiciously and that school boards and administrators should hold public school officials accountable for the resources they were given.
- *Equality* from a political perspective addresses equal rights; from an economic perspective it addresses equal distribution of resources (Fowler, 2004). Applied to public education, it promotes the conviction that students are entitled to have equal access to learning opportunities. Most often, degrees of equality have been determined by measuring variations in revenue and spending across local districts in a given state (Crampton & Whitney, 1996). This approach focused entirely on inputs. After 1960, greater attention was given to defining equality based on need. Specifically, compensatory programs sponsored by federal legislation (e.g., Tile I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and P. L. 94-142) were predicated on the belief that economically disadvantaged and special needs students had to receive supplemental funding to have access to a reasonably equal education (Valverde, 1988).
- *Fraternity* emerged as a result of increased diversity. Applied to education, it advances the idea that schools should prepare students to appreciate multiculturalism and to function effectively in a multicultural society (Kowalski, 2003).
- *Excellence* emerged as an education goal as America became part of a global economy and an information-based nation. The principle espouses that schools should prepare students to be economically productive to ensure they can enjoy life and contribute to the collective welfare of the nation (Finn, 1990). The value is nested in human capital theory, a construct concerned with measuring investments in human capital (e.g., education) and the rate of individual and societal returns on such investments. Excellence is often addressed in relation to efficiency—that is, progress toward excellence is evidenced by returns (e.g., economic growth of the nation) that are greater than investments (Langelett, 2002).

As noted earlier, Americans were able to reconcile their political differences and reach consensus regarding support for public schools during much of the last century (St. John, Griffith, & Allen-Hayes, 1997). Starting in the 1960s, however, policy decisions, even locally, started to become contentious, partly because federal legislation (e.g., the Civil Rights Act) and judicial decisions (e.g., those affecting racial desegregation) produced new definitions of equality and partly because the population in many districts was becoming less homogeneous. During the 1970s, legal disputes over the equality and adequacy and over the appropriate balance between liberty and equality resulted in lawsuits challenging state financing of public schools in over 40 states (King et al., 2003). And in the 1980s, widespread stakeholder dissatisfaction with public education emerged after critics charged

that ineffective schools had jeopardized America's status as the world's leading economic power. As federal and state governments elevated pressures for reform, astute scholars (e.g., Strike, 1985; Valverde, 1988) asked, Could the country's public school system concurrently attain equality and excellence?

Politics, Reform, and Engagement

Today, the population of the typical school district is divided into factions that more often than not compete with each other for influence and resources (Cooper et al., 2004). Disagreements are based on philosophy (e.g., the comparative importance of excellence vs. equality), economics (e.g., funding for public schools), religion (e.g., whether to teach the theory of evolution), and politics (e.g., centralized state control vs. local control). The effects have been obvious in relation to pursuing school reform.

Since the mid-1980s, three different strategies, each detailing a different mix of educator and stakeholder involvement, have been proposed (St. John et al., 1997). They reflect differences of opinion regarding who should set policy for school improvement and the roles that educators and other stakeholders should play in this critical process. The three approaches are shown in Figure 2–2 and explained in the order in which they evolved.

Instrumental Approach. During much of the 1980s, states pursued a centralized strategy for school reform commonly referred to as an instrumental approach. Instrumental action has been defined as being implementation oriented, as having little relationship to strategic choices about goals and actions (Habermas, 1984, 1987). Specifically, state policymakers promulgated intensification mandates that required teachers and students to do more of what they were already doing. This action was predicated on the belief that lazy students and incompetent teachers were primarily responsible for low-performing schools (Kirst, 1988). Educators who had to implement the mandates felt as though they were being treated instrumentally, as though they have little influence over reform policies or their roles as teachers or administrators (St. John et al., 1997). In essence, they saw themselves as instruments of externally constructed policies.

Instrumental view	◆ Policy developed by federal/state authorities ◆ Educators' roles are solely to implement policy
Strategic view	◆ Policy developed by stakeholder representatives ◆ Educators' roles are to provide input and implement policy
Communicative view	◆ Policy developed through democratic discourse allowing all stakeholders opportunities to participate ◆ Educators' roles are to participate in the discourse, faciliate deliberations, and implement policy

FIGURE 2–2
Three Approaches to Forging and Implementing Reform Policy

Many parents also felt alienated because they were denied opportunities to have a direct role in determining what should be done to improve schools (St. John et al., 1997). Excluded from policy development, stakeholders often resorted to agitation in an effort to pursue their individual rights and interests (Levin, 1987, 1999; Miron, 1996).

By the mid-1980s, the instrumental approach was being heavily criticized. Among the points raised by detractors, three were especially cogent:

1. The desired level of improvement had not been achieved, in large measure because generic mandates had varying degrees of relevance across schools (Fullan, 2000; Orlich, 1989).
2. The use of power and coercion has never really worked well in public education, because reliance on laws, regulations, and mandates flies in the face of conventional wisdom (Finn, 1991). Many parents and other stakeholders, angered by being denied opportunities to pursue their individual rights and interests, criticized state-imposed reforms (Levin, 1999).
3. Educators resented being treated as instruments of reform, and they often criticized state mandates as being irrelevant or ineffective (Pogrow, 1996).

Strategic Approach. By the late 1980s, a new approach to pursuing school reform had emerged. The new tactic was to engage educators, parents, and other stakeholders in setting school-improvement goals locally. This process has been characterized as strategic action (Habermas, 1984, 1987).

Because of philosophical differences, however, engaging all stakeholders in policy decisions was deemed impractical. Consequently, the approach was applied using a form of representative democracy—that is, stakeholder groups would have one or a few representatives directly involved in making important decisions (St. John et al., 1997). The most readily recognized adaptation of the strategic approach was site-based management (Malen, 1994).

Within 10 years, however, the efficacy of the strategic approach was being challenged. On the one hand, there was scant evidence that making reform decisions at the school level had improved student learning (Wohlstetter, Van Kirk, Robertson, & Mohrman, 1997). On the other hand, much of the work conducted by school councils occurred in isolation–that is, most stakeholders were still being denied opportunities to express their individual rights and interests (Latham, 1998). This condition was problematic when councils made decisions unacceptable to many of the school's stakeholders.

Communicative Approach. Communicative action focuses on building understanding, rather than on achieving goals per se (Habermas, 1984, 1987). As examples, it entails the following:

- Publicly testing personal hypotheses about the causes of problems,
- Wrestling internally with the morally problematic aspect of educational practice (that is, critical reflection), and
- Helping and encouraging the development of others (St. John et al., 1997, pp. 10–11).

The concept of a learning community embodies the spirit of the communicative approach; however, previous considerations of learning communities have focused on internal school relationships (i.e., relations among educators and between educators and students). Applying the communicative approach more broadly results in parents and other district residents being included. Applications require leaders who can (a) communicate openly and effectively, (b) manage conflict successfully, and (c) facilitate consensus building efficiently (Kowalski et al., 2007).

SUMMARY

Social and political realities have produced a landscape for public education that is dramatically different from the one that existed 50 years ago. Today, many communities are divided philosophically and politically, and reaching consensus in relation to public policy is extremely difficult. In the context of contemporary practice, superintendents and principals no longer can selectively provide information and expect citizens to rally around the public schools. Instead, they face the probability that any initiative, regardless of value and need, will be opposed by some segment of the community (Bauman, 1996; Stone, et al., 2006). To move forward, they must maintain positive relationships with all stakeholder groups and use the associations to communicate openly and continuously so that opposing factions can share and test their views (Kowalski, 2005).

The need for administrators to facilitate open dialogue has been elevated by requirements to involve local stakeholders in school improvement efforts. Yet, nationally and in most local districts, stakeholders are divided into two main groups. One faction contends that excellence requires a broader range of programming and additional funds for low-performing schools. Proponents contend that students making unsatisfactory progress, especially those who are disadvantaged or have special needs, will not reach their potential unless they are prepared to learn and provided the same opportunities made available in effective schools (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Citizens who support this position promote both additional funding for public schools and an expanded role for federal and state governments.

Members of the other faction take an opposite position. They reject the notion that additional funds and broader social programs will elevate low-performing schools to excellence. Instead, they argue that these schools should have to compete for students. Faced with this challenge, administrators and teachers either would have to improve programs and instruction, or their school would eventually close (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn, 1991). Efforts by this group have included legislation to create charter schools, tuition tax credits, vouchers, and similar ideas intended to change the status of public schools as quasi-monopolies.

As you reflect on the content in this chapter, consider how evolving social and political conditions have intertwined to create a new landscape for public schools. Also think about your own philosophy and political views. How do you believe excellence is best achieved in schools?