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COMMENTARY

The Public School Ownership Gap

By **T. Elijah Hawkes**

Universal free public schooling, a cornerstone of our modern democracy, is facing a quiet crisis. One that I call the ownership gap.

Medical advances, dual-earner households, urbanization, and many other social changes mean that Americans are living longer and having fewer children. Our nation has realized that demographic shifts like these have a big impact on our workforce, tax base, long-term health care, and Social Security. But what about on our public schools?

During the baby-boom era, a school-age child lived in nearly every other house on the block. Now, it's different. According to the **2010 U.S. Census**, children between the ages of 6 and 17 reside in less than 26 percent of households. Translation: The vast majority of American homes have an absence of school-age kids, which means that most folks paying for public schools have little, if any, direct contact with them. This is bad news.

It's bad news for any enterprise, public or private, when the owners, funders, or majority stakeholders—taxpayers, in this case—are not properly informed and connected to the work. You'll find no better recipe for accountability dysfunction, inefficient operations, and irrelevance. Think of the major challenges we often hear associated with public schools, including:

Accountability. We often hear that we need better accountability in schools. This is true. Because of the ownership gap, most taxpayers have limited personal contact with our schools, and so they can't gather the information they need for a proper evaluation. To judge teaching and learning, one must observe and experience it. When we force our citizenry to judge schooling from a distance, what we get is what we've got—an accountability system that relies too much on simplistic test scores to assess student, teacher, and school performance.

Budgets. We often hear communities questioning whether the money we

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"The vast majority of American homes have an absence of school-age kids, which means that most folks paying

spend on schools is really worth it. This is because most households are paying for the education of other people's children. Yes, there are strong, rational arguments for why we should provide schooling for our neighbor's child—just compare the public cost of putting a boy through school with the cost of keeping a man in prison. Educating other people's children makes good sense and good social policy. But without personal connections to an institution, people are more likely to question its worth. This is as true of public schools as it is of a public library, a public park, or the military. If you are personally connected, you tend to value something more deeply.

for public schools have little, if any, direct contact with them."

Relevance. We often hear that we need more relevant curricula and better career preparation for our young people. This also is true. Because of the ownership gap, we have a society in which teachers rarely interact professionally with people in other careers. Science and math teachers, for instance, typically don't collaborate with engineers. This is bizarre. And this de facto segregation of the teaching profession naturally leads to schooling that's divorced from contemporary life.

Change. We also often hear that schools are resistant to change. I don't think that educators are any more reluctant to adapt to a changing society than other people. But I know that when work in any profession stays sheltered from public view, as is the case with a lot of classroom teaching, there is little chance the practitioner will be exposed to the information, incentives, or pressures that compel innovation.

It is clear that the ownership gap is connected to many of the challenges schools are facing. Thankfully, as simple as it is to name a source of our problems—the shifting demographics of the American family—it is almost as easy to name a remedy: teaching and learning that deeply connect school with the people and world outside.

I've been fortunate to encounter several powerful models of this kind of schooling in recent years. And these are not new initiatives, grant-funded fads, pilot programs, or mini-schools. These are long-standing, extensive efforts brought to scale with lots of hard work in traditional public schools.

- **King Middle School in Portland, Maine.** This public school is part of the Expeditionary Learning, or EL, network, an organization of educators who work hard to develop curricula that have contemporary real-world relevance. At King, students do fieldwork rather than just take field trips, and local experts are a part of the program. Students present their work in public exhibitions of learning, and the curriculum requires them to become hands-on citizen problem-solvers, approaching topics in ways that have an authentic connection to their surrounding community. Because the work is public and often engages the public, the taxpayers in this New England city better understand where their dollars are going; students better understand their local resources as well as their challenges; and teachers are compelled to innovate and change with the world outside their school.

- **The New York Performance Standards Consortium in New York City.** Instead of high-stakes tests, students in these public high schools are judged by another challenging, state-approved system. To graduate, students must produce in-depth papers in each of their core subjects and defend that work publicly before panels of teachers and citizen evaluators. These evaluators are professionals who are not school parents, who work outside the school, and who, through this process, contribute their expertise to their city's educational enterprise. As a principal at one of

these schools, I often heard evaluators say that the process reminded them of a thesis defense. This is a rigorous accountability system that holds students to a high standard, brings student and teacher work into a public forum, and allows tax-paying citizens to help assess the work their schools produce.

- **Randolph Union High School** in Randolph, Vt. Since joining this school community three years ago, I've been impressed by the town's support for public education. "Senior project"—the school's capstone graduation expectation—is one of the reasons why. Every year, students must each design an original project that pursues new learning in collaboration with a mentor in the community. Additional citizen experts sit on panels that evaluate whether the projects meet the district's standards. If students don't pass, they don't graduate. The stakes are high, and the rewards are many for the students and the community. In a graduating class of 70 students, there are 70 different collaborations every year, with new citizen engagement and new projects connecting school to community life.

In short, closing the ownership gap is about building meaningful partnerships in core subject areas with individuals from many walks of life, particularly those who don't have kids in our classrooms.

Teachers and administrators may worry that this kind of learning shifts our focus away from test-based accountability measures. But look, the best protection from a capricious and flawed high-stakes accountability system is to do really good work, make the work visible, and ensure that it involves many collaborators, including voters, taxpayers, and citizens outside the school walls.

Teachers often say that they want kids to "feel ownership," to feel the relevance of what's being learned. Well, if we are to ensure the future vitality of our public schools, every American must feel this relevance. Citizens from all walks of life need to be connected to our schools and finding meaning there, not just footing the bill.

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