

**THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE ON STANDARDS-
BASED EDUCATION:
*FINAL REPORT***

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to the need to ensure that standards fulfill their promise of supporting a system of education that leaves no child behind, McREL created a multimedia, multi-site, ongoing nationwide dialogue related to standards-based reform efforts. These dialogues provided participants with opportunities to share underlying assumptions, beliefs, and research about how to effectively implement standards-based reform to realize the overarching goal of the standards movement — to help all students achieve high standards.

The goals of this National Dialogue project included:

- creating collaborative inquiry that involves the entire range of citizenry and seeks to offer solutions that represent the best thinking of a wide range of people across the nation;
- fostering an exchange of information and ideas at all levels of the system and among educators and stakeholders from across the nation on issues related to standards-based education; and
- helping all stakeholders create shared understanding about how to effectively implement standards-based reforms to realize the overarching goal of the standards movement — to help all students achieve high standards.

To engage community members in this dialogue, McREL created a set of “conversation starter” materials designed to help communities engage in thoughtful deliberation on an issue of key concern for districts and schools in light of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 — how to help all students achieve high academic standards.

This report details the outcomes of the National Dialogue over the course of the past four years and provides insights into how decision makers might capitalize on the findings to effect the changes necessary to ensure that all children succeed. This executive summary is intended to provide a brief overview of methods and findings, as well as the major implications of those findings.

With respect to the overall outcomes of the conversations:

- The public is interested in engaging in conversations about education, as evidenced by the level of interest in McREL’s National Dialogue materials and process.
- Dialogue participants agree that leaving no child behind would take much more than merely holding a school accountable for results and punishing failure with sanctions.
- Conversation topics and emphases of concern have shifted over time — the public appears to be more attuned to the necessity of standards, though still struggles with fundamental issues about education (e.g., the purpose of education).

- Participants from different locations express slightly different perspectives on standards-based education.
- Education accountability is important to the public; they consider it imperative that accountability be shared, that accountability not be construed as a single test score, and that accountability be accompanied by flexibility.
- Participants consider resources necessary for ensuring student success, though differences among the public are evident in how resources ought to be positioned.

Anticipated outcomes of the National Dialogue were evaluated utilizing criteria that reflected the utility of the Dialogues (in terms of such factors as appropriateness, timeliness, and anticipated future use) and the benefits of the Dialogues (in terms of fostering shared understandings, fostering substantive knowledge on technical issues, fostering deeper appreciation of alternative perspectives, and in terms of encouraging broad engagement). The evaluation revealed that the National Dialogue met its intended goals:

- Participants and moderators reported high levels of engagement and open, respectful conversations that were meaningful and relevant.
- Demographically speaking, the conversations drew together diverse constituencies with varied perspectives, and although participants did not always reach consensus or completely understand one another's perspectives, the exposure to varied understandings is crucial.
- Participants did not report feeling disenfranchised because of technical issues — if anything, participants were deeply engaged in the ideas associated with standards-based education.
- Although actions and outcomes at the community level directly emanating from Dialogue participation are not discernable, arguably the Dialogue served its purposes well — particularly in terms of engaging the public in the conversation and facilitating their discovery process in terms of their own and their fellow citizens' perspectives regarding education.

McREL's experience with the National Dialogue project and the analysis of the data collected lead us to offer conclusions and recommendations for policymakers endeavoring to engage the full support of the public in improving our nation's schools. Our recommendations address two areas — assessment and accountability and public engagement:

- Current forms of accountability that focus on reporting test scores in individual content areas for groups of students at particular grade levels do not appear to have the same meaning and value for the public as they do for policymakers.
- Parent participants expressed considerably more tolerance for variations in outcomes for their own children than policymakers would allow.
- If policymakers want public education to be truly accountable to the public, they need to reframe accountability policies in ways that are meaningful to the public.

- The public wants multiple measures of performance and multiple ways for students to demonstrate their competencies.
- Education leaders need to refine their communication to the public about accountability.
- The current high-stakes testing accountability environment, though intended in part to increase public awareness and involvement in education, might actually cause the public to be further disengaged from the process, in part because of the technical nature of the conversations and because meaningfully involving parents in education might be superseded by attention to increasing test performance.
- Education leaders need to reach out to the public — people want to be involved but do not know how to get involved.

Our experience with the Dialogues suggests that the standards movement has reached a new stage in its evolution. The public no longer questions the wisdom of standards, assessments, and accountability *per se*, but rather, questions whether or not the focus on accountability actually helps students reach the most important goals in their development. It is not only academic success that is on the minds of parents and the public. Dialogue participants express deep concern about students' civic-mindedness, sense of caring for others, flexibility and adaptability, work ethic, and creativity, as much as or, in some cases, more than, test scores.

Ultimately, the conversations turn to fundamental questions about the purpose of our educational system, particularly in light of preparing students to cope with the uncertainties of the future. Participants express concern about the rapid pace of change and the new knowledge and skills students will need to acquire to thrive in the 21st century. Discussion arises about the very nature of schooling — will it remain essentially as it is today, in buildings with children grouped into grades according to age, with one teacher to guide them? Or will the system become something few have imagined, much less discussed — one without the schools of today but perhaps with individualized learning plans for each student and a wide variety of ways (virtual and face-to-face) to reach goals and demonstrate proficiency? This is a discussion that should be nurtured in communities and is a question that McREL intends to pursue in our further work toward ensuring that educational leaders are prepared to meet the challenges ahead.

INTRODUCTION

In response to the need to ensure that standards fulfill their promise of supporting a system of education that leaves no child behind, McREL created a multimedia, multi-site, ongoing nationwide dialogue related to standards-based reform efforts. These dialogues provided participants with opportunities to share underlying assumptions, beliefs, and research about how to effectively implement standards-based reform to realize the overarching goal of the standards movement — to help all students achieve high standards.

McREL convened the initiating event for the Dialogues in Kansas City, MO in April 2001. This meeting generated interest in creating dialogues on standards-based reforms at the state and local levels. Over the next three years, similar dialogues and focus groups occurred in urban, suburban, and rural locations all around the country. The project, conducted under the auspices of the regional educational laboratory contract, was coordinated with work done for the Kettering Foundation to examine public perceptions of standards-based education, the implications of standards, and the meaning of accountability to the public. The findings from the Kettering study are incorporated into this report, which summarizes findings from the National Dialogue project and provides recommendations for policymakers.

GOALS OF THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE PROJECT

The goals of the National Dialogue included:

- creating collaborative inquiry that involves the entire range of citizenry and seeks to offer solutions that represent the best thinking of a wide range of people across the nation;
- fostering an exchange of information and ideas at all levels of the system and among educators and stakeholders from across the nation on issues related to standards-based education; and
- helping all stakeholders create shared understanding about how to effectively implement standards-based reforms to realize the overarching goal of the standards movement — to help all students achieve high standards.

Toward these ends, the National Dialogue activities included developing, field-testing, and disseminating a collaborative inquiry process, gathering and disseminating insights from the Dialogues to foster a nationwide exchange of ideas, and providing opportunities for stakeholders to develop a shared understanding about standards.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE DIALOGUE FRAMEWORK

From the outset, McREL intended to start this nationwide initiative and follow it wherever conversations and interest took it. To facilitate this process, we explored a number of public engagement models that could be adapted for this purpose. The National Issues Forums (www.nifi.org), a model of ongoing community dialogue sponsored by the Kettering Foundation (www.kettering.org) and carried out, in large part, by Public Agenda (www.publicagenda.org), appeared to provide an appropriate framework for our work. Thus, in 2002, we built a partnership with Public Agenda and created a set of Dialogue materials with the objective of situating the National Dialogue on Standards-Based Education reform within the ongoing efforts of the

National Issues Forums. By connecting the project with these existing efforts and tapping into the networks these organizations have created, it was possible to significantly expand and sustain the National Dialogue.

In collaboration with Public Agenda, a set of “conversation starter” materials were designed to help communities engage in thoughtful deliberation on an issue of key concern for districts and schools in light of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 — how to help all students achieve high academic standards. The materials included a 12-minute video, produced both in English and in Spanish, explaining the conversation framework and showing clips from actual dialogues. A participant guide was created for use during the discussion. The guide also included participant survey instruments which were collected and analyzed following each dialogue. Finally, a guide for use by moderators in their training as well as during the facilitation of the Dialogue was created. This set of materials is included as attachments.

EVALUATION

Beyond the development phase of the National Dialogue materials (including solicitation of feedback and appropriate adjustments where indicated), it was determined that the National Dialogue should be assessed relative to the extent to which the materials and the process itself met the following goals:

- allowed for meaningful exchanges of information through conversation;
- enabled various levels of stakeholders to be engaged in conversations;
- provided a useful, appropriate, timely conversation with sustained benefits (participants anticipate using the information);
- facilitated the development of a shared understanding of standards-based education;
- facilitated the building of a bridge between community-level conversations and technical conversations; and
- facilitated a better understanding of other stakeholder perspectives.

Specific evaluation questions were derived from the objectives of the National Dialogue. Anticipated outcomes of the project were evaluated utilizing criteria that reflected the utility of the Dialogues (in terms of such factors as appropriateness, timeliness, and anticipated future use) and the benefits of the Dialogues (in terms of fostering shared understandings, substantive knowledge on technical issues, and deeper appreciation of alternative perspectives, and encouraging broad engagement).

Evaluation data sources included site observations of dialogues, on-site participant surveys, and participant and moderator interviews and follow-up surveys. A detailed report of evaluation findings is included as Appendix A. A summary of the findings is included in the section of this report called *Findings from the Dialogues*.

DISSEMINATION OF MATERIALS

The materials were disseminated in a variety of ways, in addition to being made available for downloading or ordering through the National Dialogue website. Initially, a packet including both guides, the video, and an explanatory letter was sent to more than 100 national organizations with an interest in encouraging public engagement in education. These organizations were invited to disseminate the information to their own audiences and to contact McREL for technical assistance with conducting a dialogue.

At the same time, McREL published an issue brief entitled *Digging deeper: Where does the public stand on standards-based education?* (Goodwin, 2003). This brief described the results of a series of focus groups conducted regarding public opinion on standards-based education and support for low-performing schools and invited readers to contact McREL for information about the National Dialogue.

The brief was mailed or e-mailed to almost 59,000 individuals and organizations around the country. The response to the brief was overwhelming. National organizations such as the Public Education Network, the Institute for Educational Leadership, and the National Center for Learning Disabilities provided links to the brief on their own websites. State-level organizations such as the California State Library and the Electronic Library of Current Educational Research in Michigan did the same.

The dissemination efforts resulted in nearly 60 individual and organizational requests for further information and technical assistance with conducting a community dialogue. Requests came from 34 states and two Canadian provinces. In response to requests for support, McREL provided all materials needed for communities to host a dialogue and, in some cases, offered training for dialogue moderators and assistance with event planning. In return, hosting organizations were asked to allow us to collect data from participants and organizers regarding the impact of the Dialogue on their attitudes and actions related to standards-based education.

Ultimately, McREL provided intensive support for 10 dialogues. Reports from each of these dialogues are posted on the website (www.nationaldialogue.org). A summary of the overall findings from these dialogues are described in this report. In addition, other local, state, and national organizations conducted dialogues on their own, using the conversation starter materials with minimal assistance from McREL.

Although tracking web hits for the National Dialogue website only began in January 2004, 290,672 hits have been tallied since that time representing 7,854 unique visitors. In addition, the site was visited by individuals in the United States and Guam as well as in 22 other countries.

FRAMEWORK FOR THE DIALOGUE

To provide some structure and an initial starting point for the conversation, the Dialogue on standards was based on a framework that proposed the following three approaches for helping all students achieve high standards:

APPROACH ONE: HELP STUDENTS ACHIEVE HIGH STANDARDS THROUGH ACCOUNTABILITY

The conversation starter materials provided to each participant describe this choice as follows:

Choice One supporters say that for too long, we expected too little from our schools and our students — and got exactly what we expected. To change this situation, we need to define what students should know, test whether they have learned what they should know, and report the results. Doing so allows successful schools to receive the recognition they deserve and to act as models, while schools that fall short can be helped — and when necessary, pressured— to improve. And it keeps students who are not learning from falling through the cracks. In short, only by shining the bright light of accountability on the entire system will all schools be spurred to improve results for all students.

APPROACH TWO: HELP STUDENTS ACHIEVE HIGH STANDARDS BY PROVIDING NEEDED RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

The conversation starter materials provided to each participant described this choice as follows:

Choice Two supporters say that standards-based reforms should not only hold high expectations but also should provide high levels of support for all students, teachers, and education leaders to ensure that all students have the opportunities they need to succeed. However, in too many places, standards-based reforms are being sabotaged by what has been called the “evil twin” of standards — the use of high-stakes tests to shame and blame schools into improving without giving them the resources they need to improve. People who support this choice say that if we are really serious about setting high standards for all kids, we need to put our money where our mouths are.

APPROACH THREE: HELP STUDENTS ACHIEVE HIGH STANDARDS BY MAINTAINING FLEXIBILITY AND LOCAL CONTROL

The conversation starter materials provided to each participant described this choice as follows:

Choice Three supporters say that while standards are important guideposts for what kids should learn, we should avoid taking a one-size-fits-all approach to education and remember that schools are about more than just core or basic academics. People who support this choice say that all kids, parents, and communities are different. Therefore, we need to ensure that in putting standards in place, we don’t “standardize” schools so that they all wind up looking alike. People who support this choice say that parents want their schools to be accountable, yet not necessarily to lawmakers or school board members, but rather to them.

OVERVIEW OF THE DIALOGUE PROCESS

After viewing a conversation starter video, participants broke into small groups to deliberate each of these approaches, or choices. Led by a trained facilitator, they were asked to describe which

choice is closest to their own view and then to weigh the pros and cons of each choice. Following a discussion of the choice framework, each small group responded to the following questions:

1. In our conversation about standards-based education, have we discovered any **common ground**?
2. What were our important **areas of disagreement** — the things we have to keep talking about to work out our differences and move ahead?
3. What are the **questions and concerns** that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?
4. How can schools, parents, and the larger community do a better job of working together to make sure standards work as well as possible for all our students and that we are doing all we can to help them succeed?

FINDINGS FROM THE DIALOGUES

The objective in summarizing the findings across dialogues is to offer insights to policymakers regarding public¹ attitudes toward standards-based education and accountability and the effects of engaging the public in discussion about standards-based education.

ATTITUDES TOWARD STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION

Table 1 summarizes the key themes that emerged from 10 dialogues that occurred from 2001 through 2004 in 10 different cities around the country. For these dialogues, McREL staff either facilitated or trained community moderators to facilitate the Dialogue, and observed the Dialogues and collected participant responses to surveys about the experience.

General Observations

A review of themes across the various dialogues reveals a consistent cry for balance in the current education reform movement. Participants pointed to strengths and weaknesses in each of the three proposed choices but, overall, found common ground in the notion that leaving no child behind will require pursuing a combination of all three.

In order to be truly successful in leaving no child behind, participants agreed it would take much more than merely holding a school accountable for results and punishing failure with sanctions. The need for the community to share accountability for results and to ante up the resources needed to get results was often discussed. Participants increasingly rejected the “one-size-fits-all” notion embedded in the No Child Left Behind legislation and made clear the view that there is no silver bullet to closing the achievement gap.

Changes Over Time

McREL facilitators and observers noticed a change in the focus of the conversations over the course of the project period. In the first year, participants evidenced much more uneasiness with

¹ Of course we recognize that our National Dialogue community conversations have engaged only a small portion of the ‘public’ and furthermore we are aware that our sample is not statistically representative of the larger ‘public’ for whom issues of standards and accountability are of interest.

Table 1. Summary of Key Themes Organized by Dialogue

June 2001 Colorado (urban, suburban)	October 2001 New Mexico (rural)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards have had positive impacts for kids. • We need to revisit and return to our original purpose for standards. • CO’s reform efforts are driven by the statewide test. • The public needs to be engaged in meaningful discussion about reform. • Standards cannot address all of the public’s concerns about their schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards are written by experts who do not understand rural schools and communities. • Standards drive out locally-designed curriculum in rural schools. • Content standards are important but high-stakes tests cause concern. • The most valuable outcomes for students relate to becoming good community members (not reading and writing). • Support place-based education and show whether or not place-based education improves test scores.
October 2002 Missouri (urban, suburban, rural)	December 2002 Colorado (urban, suburban, rural)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability is necessary, but needs to be fair and balanced. • More, and better, data is needed to guide reform. • Accountability has demanded results without granting flexibility. • Resources are vitally important to meeting this challenge. • The whole community is responsible for leaving no child behind. • Substantial public support must be generated to leave no child behind. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards and assessments are important and necessary. • Accountability is important, but it shouldn’t be based solely on tests. • Accountability should go hand-in-hand with flexibility. • Schools need more resources to help all students learn. • Schools need better diagnostic data to guide decisions. • Current reforms are a simple response to a complex problem. • School boards need to show their publics they are listening.
April 2003 Virginia (rural)	May 2003 Virginia (rural)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability is important and necessary. • Accountability measures need to be re-examined. • Resources must be more targeted. • More community involvement is needed. • Local control is important, but should be balanced with external oversight. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools need more resources to achieve the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act. • Concerns about loss of local control are secondary to concerns about resources. • Accountability is necessary, but needs to be comprehensive and based on multiple measures. • Testing should not dominate the education process. • Teachers need to be held more accountable, but also supported with more training. • NCLB may be setting up schools for failure.

November 2003 Connecticut (urban, suburban)	January 2004 South Dakota (rural)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability is not just limited to schools and their employees; involvement of the other parties who are accountable needs to increase (including parents and community members). • A variety of assessments are necessary to determine students' knowledge. • Although funding is not the answer, resources need to be appropriately positioned. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability is not just limited to schools; involvement of parents, community members and students is crucial. • Standards are important for everyone, but there are different routes to reaching the standards. • Different types of assessments are necessary to determine students' knowledge. • Although funding is not the answer, resources need to be positioned strategically.
January 2004 California (suburban)	February 2004 Michigan (urban, suburban)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards are “too standard;” they promote a “one-size-fits-all” approach. • Local control means letting the community define success and how to achieve it. • Accountability should be shared among educators, parents, students, community members, and politicians. • Resources are critical in meeting students' individual needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability is important but it should be shared. • A variety of assessments will best determine what students know. • Sufficient resources are required to meet the needs of all students. • Educators should become politically active.

the standards movement itself than in later years. In 2001, participants questioned the relevance of the standards to their own communities and the potentially damaging effects on students and schools of high-stakes testing. They also questioned whether or not standards-based reform could solve every problem of the public school system.

In 2002 and beyond, following the signing into law of the No Child Left Behind Act, participants seemed to accept standards and accountability as an inevitable part of the public education landscape. Moreover, they supported the basic premise of the movement — to clearly specify what students should know and be able to do, measure their performance and publicly report the results — but questioned implementation details such as the quality of the measurement tools being used, the resources available to help students reach standards, and who should be held responsible if students don't perform.

Throughout 2003 and 2004, conversation participants evidenced greater knowledge and understanding of the standards movement, particularly as it is being played out through NCLB. The discussions were at a deeper level than previously and focused more on how to improve achievement, particularly in light of the great variation among students' interests and abilities. Participants demonstrated a growing understanding of the enormity of the task and were quick to reject simple solutions to the problem of low student achievement. There appeared to be broad acceptance of the goal of leaving no child behind but they continued to express skepticism about the benefits of the accountability movement as currently constructed.

Differences Among Locales

There were some differences among urban, suburban, and rural participants. Most notably, rural groups tended to favor preserving local control and to express concern that “outsiders” (such as federal or state governments) had too much say over what and how well their students should learn. All groups expressed concern that a single test score was not a sufficient, or even accurate, measure of student performance, but this concern was more pronounced among rural groups. The notion that all students should be prepared to go to college was also rejected by many participants across locales, but was emphasized more frequently in rural communities.

Accountability

Whereas most dialogue groups found strong common ground around the notion that accountability is a necessary component of improving schools, participants rejected the idea that accountability methods alone were sufficient to do the job. In addition, participants sought changes to the current accountability construct as it is embedded in NCLB.

Accountability must be shared. Participants asserted that a broad range of stakeholders need to take responsibility for the success of a community’s students. It is not only unfair, but unproductive, to lay the entire blame for low achievement at the doorstep of the school. Many discussants pointed to the fact that students bear no personal consequences for low performance on standardized tests (unless it is tied to promotion or graduation). Even teachers hold on to their jobs and continue to be paid at the same levels regardless of the performance of their students. And parents, who many feel are in the best position to either support or hinder their child’s academic success, face no consequences for failure and, in fact, may be “rewarded” by being able to move their child to a “better” school at the district’s expense. More people should be held directly accountable for the success or failure of students, participants said, although suggestions for accomplishing this were not forthcoming.

Accountability should be based on more than just test scores. Throughout the conversations, there were repeated voices questioning the value of a single test score in determining whether or not children were learning. These comments usually were raised in the context of agreement with accountability principles (including the importance of assessment) along with concerns that a single test score from a single point in time does not give parents and the public the information they need to assess the quality of the education being provided. Yes, participants agreed, we do need to know whether or not our children are learning, but do tests, as currently constructed, tell us all we need to know? Tests are viewed only as good as what they can measure and most participants questioned the ability of the current tests to measure all they want to know or believe is important about schooling.

Flexibility should be provided in meeting accountability mandates. Participants expressed a concern that not only should there be multiple ways of demonstrating proficiency; there also should be multiple ways for students to attain proficiency. The notion embedded in the original standards movement — that what students need to know stays constant, but how they learn and how long it takes to learn varies by individual — has been lost in the current accountability movement, people said. The current system requires all students to take the same test on the same day, whether or not they have learned the material. It also requires all students to demonstrate their proficiency in the same way — by achieving a prescribed score on a standardized test.

There was little support expressed for ascribing consequences (such as loss of funding or public labeling) to failing schools. Such policies were counterintuitive to most participants. Moreover,

participants repeatedly expressed concerns about the current trend toward narrowing the curriculum in order to meet test score goals.

Resources

Many participants entered into the conversation from the point of view that, if only there were more resources, the problem of low student achievement could be remedied. As the discussion continued, however, the general consensus across conversations was that more resources were necessary but not sufficient to solve the problem. Indeed, a more targeted, focused use of increased resources was deemed critical. Knowing what steps to take to improve achievement among those students who struggle most is what is needed. In the meantime, “throwing money at the problem” drew little support among participants. However, in several conversations, it was felt that more resources would provide an opportunity for more individualized instruction and that this individualized approach (which strategically aligns resources with needs) would be necessary to ensure that no child is left behind.

Across the conversations it became evident that the public recognizes a relationship between education funding and student success, and that they even support the notion of increasing resources to raise academic achievement, provided the appropriated resources are wisely expended. Pre- to post-participation survey data bear this out, with over 90 percent of respondents indicating a willingness to “redistribute resources or raise taxes” in order to help students achieve. This response was consistent both before and after participation in the conversation.

Flexibility and Local Control

For many participants, the issue of local control revolved around the role of the broader community in education reform. Few participants were willing to say that, in all cases, local control is best. Indeed, local control should be balanced with appropriate oversight to ensure that all students’ needs were being met, not just the ones who squeaked the loudest. But it was also noted that without any local control, the broader community loses its sense of responsibility for the outcomes and this is, on the whole, counterproductive to reaching the goals of school reform. The notion that it takes a village to raise a child was a common refrain.

Similarly, participants wanted maximum flexibility in the way in which the accountability goals could be met. The one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning was consistently rejected in nearly every conversation. Two-thirds of survey respondents, both before and after the conversation, declared an interest in maintaining local control, even if such policies resulted in uneven quality across schools or diminished the “common school” experience of traditional public education.

EFFECTS OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Evaluation data helped clarify the effects of participating in the Dialogue on attitudes and actions toward standards-based education and accountability as summarized below.

Engaging in Meaningful Dialogue

Participants uniformly agreed that they were able to actively engage in the conversation and, during site observations, participants expressed gratitude to have been included in the conversation about educational standards in their community. Moreover, during follow-up

interviews, moderators indicated that the participants were engaged. The following comment from a moderator provides a sense of the perceived level of participant engagement:

They were highly engaged. Evidence: They stayed and talked at the end. They spoke to their peers about it, they sent us follow up e-mails and calls. They brought the topic up in dialogues that occurred after the session.

During dialogue observations, through follow-up conversations and through the post-Dialogue questionnaires, participants agreed that the conversation was useful and meaningful. One follow-up comment captures the extent to which participants appreciated the opportunity to engage:

I really enjoyed listening to the others and gained a new insight into the youth of today! The Dialogue is priceless and it helps me talk to the students of today and make their education meaningful.

Moderator perceptions of the utility of the conversation provide additional support for the participant's own reflections, indicating that participants were pleased they were given the opportunity to engage in the topic and that they were able to parlay the National Dialogue conversation into other arenas.

Follow-up responses from moderators also indicated that the conversations seemed relevant. For instance, an open-ended question regarding the relevance of the conversation included the following comment:

Yes [it was relevant]. Participants were there because they were looking for a better understanding of standards-based education and to distinguish some of their concepts.

However, not all moderators agreed, as evidenced by the misgiving of one moderator, “[Participants] feel that a lot of talk happens and no action.” Such a sentiment was echoed in the conversations that we listened to during our site observations, with participants sometimes bemoaning the fact that their voices would be recorded and potential actions would be discussed, but in the end nothing would come of the conversation.

By their nature, conversations on standards-based education and testing and assessment turn on very technical issues associated with benchmarks, alignment or the psychometric properties of testing instruments. Thus, the extent to which participants engaged with substantive ideas associated with standards-based education (e.g., defining standards, benchmarks, issues of assessment) in nontechnical ways was examined.

During follow-up conversations and surveys, we asked participants to reflect on the extent to which they were able to understand the conversation, including any technical issues that arose. Participants indicated that they felt comfortable in their understanding, rating this item a 4.45 (on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates ‘not at all’ and 5 indicates ‘to a great extent’). In addition, moderators noted that they did not feel as though technical details about standards or testing “took over” the conversations.

Appreciating Diverse Perspectives

Dialogues were attended by a broad range of interested citizens, including local business leaders, parents, teachers, counselors, principals, retirees, and in many cases, students. Although the

majority of participants were White/Caucasian, this descriptive statistic must be accompanied with the caveat that one of our largest Dialogue sites in 2004 was in a rural area with very few community members and parents who were not White. Nevertheless, diversity of opinion was clearly evident, regardless of the demographic makeup of each dialogue group. In the words of one respondent to a follow-up survey, “It was wonderful to have the community speak and interact. Young and old.”

In terms of whether participants felt that they had a better understanding of fellow citizens’ perspectives following the Dialogue, follow-up conversations and surveys revealed that participants agreed (though not strongly) that they learned about each others’ perspectives. Others’ perspectives can sometimes be unexpected — encounters with such different, diverse perspectives have the potential to engender self-questioning and self-reflection. Thus, during follow-up with participants, we asked whether there were any perspectives expressed during the Dialogue that surprised them. The following comments are indicative of the areas that provided new information or perspectives or that participants found particularly intriguing:

One woman said that it was okay to teach to the test, but we have to agree what the test was. That was food for thought.

I was amazed that some educators can be numb to the social/emotional needs of our students...we cannot look at children as merely test passers...

People teaching continuation alternative education, as well as our schools with high numbers of ELL students have incredible challenges which the system is not significantly addressing. They MUST have more support to begin meeting the standards with their populations.

Moderators agreed that participants learned about each other’s viewpoints — and importantly, that participants learned about perspectives from those who are in different situations (ranging from different socioeconomic strata to different developmental periods as parents) from themselves.

Developing a Shared Understanding of Standards-Based Education

An outcome of significant interest was whether or not an individual’s attitudes and actions could be influenced by the experience of the Dialogue. Survey data revealed that participants had a high degree of interest in the topic of the Dialogue and ascribed significant importance to it. In addition, after being involved in the Dialogue, participants appeared to be slightly more concerned about a number of education issues, particularly those related to measurement and testing.

Site surveys indicated that participants’ opinions about public policies regarding standards shifted following the conversation — from being less certain about what public policy on standards ought to be toward holding a more general sense or a definite sense of what those policies should be.

During follow-up surveys, when we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they felt they had a strong understanding of standards-based education prior to participating in the conversation, participants rated themselves a 4.55 (on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates ‘not at all’ and 5 indicates ‘to a great extent’). It is important to bear this in mind when one examines the mean rating for the extent to which participants felt they left the conversation with an

improved understanding of standards-based education. For this question, participants indicated that they did not feel that they learned that much (mean = 2.90; on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates ‘not at all’ and 5 indicates ‘to a great extent’). However, as one participant noted, “I think that most people do not understand what “standards-based” means. The Dialogue was useful in making it clearer to some what it means.”

Although it is difficult to ascertain whether participants actually reached a shared understanding of standards-based education through their participation in the conversation, moderators suggested that alignment on some issues was evident — for some, this centered on the need for additional communication among schools, parents, and communities; for others shared understandings were around an agreed-upon vision for education priorities. Other issues — notably the role of standards and the concomitant and requisite actions to enable and enforce standards — failed to meet the benchmark of a shared understanding. Arguably, however, the role and goal of the National Dialogue project is not to enforce or even strive for consensus-building around such broad issues as what role standards ought to play in educating youth; rather the role and goal of the Dialogue is simply to bring to the fore the disparate issues, thereby ensuring that different voices are given an opportunity to be heard. In other words, reaching a shared understanding is different from reaching agreement on priorities and next steps. One moderator summed up this important sentiment by suggesting that “everyone’s opinion was heard and respected, but not necessarily agreed upon.”

Moving Toward Action

When moderators were asked whether the participants had engaged in any related activities following their participation, moderators suggested that some participants had followed up on how to open up and improve communication between parents and schools and that others had attempted to continue to engage their communities in dialogues and advisory groups. Importantly, one moderator noted that any actions associated with the National Dialogue — whatever these may be — would benefit from the “more objective approach to topics that include standards-based education” fomented through participation in the conversation.

Follow-up conversations with participants, however, revealed that they are not always certain how they would utilize the information. Participants suggesting ‘actionable’ agendas often relate that they anticipate telling their neighbors and friends about the conversation and hope to urge others to get involved in similar conversations in their community. Others indicated that they have become more committed to helping schools raise money in tax elections and some even expressed that they feel a greater sense of confidence in themselves as educators and parents.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

McREL’s experience with the National Dialogue project and the analysis of the data collected led us to a number of conclusions and recommendations for policymakers endeavoring to engage the full support of the public in improving our nation’s schools. These recommendations are presented in two parts — assessment and accountability and public engagement.

ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Current forms of accountability that focus on reporting test scores in individual content areas for groups of students at particular grade levels do not appear to have the same meaning and value for the public as they do for policymakers. Participants in the conversations repeatedly rejected the notion that scores on such tests offered anything more than the broadest view of student

performance. Although measuring and reporting student progress was seen as important, high-stakes testing of cohorts of students, with results reported annually, was viewed as little more than a starting point for determining how well a school is meeting its objectives. Such a testing and reporting scheme does not answer the questions parents truly care about when it comes to their own children's performance or the performance of the schools their children attend.

And yet, the public agrees that schools should be held accountable for meeting agreed-upon student performance goals that are based on a set of standards developed with input from the community. The question is not, *should* they be held accountable, but, rather, *how* should they be held accountable, for *what*, and to *whom*? It would seem, based on our experience with the National Dialogue, that the public has a very different agenda for school reform than most educators and policymakers.

Indeed, a recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll² (Rose & Gallup, 2003) shows standards to be very low on the public's list of priority concerns about schools. Issues such as lack of funding, discipline, drug use, and overcrowding are ranked significantly higher as priorities than are standards or teacher quality. Dialogue participants, particularly those in rural communities, expressed concerns that the focus on reading and mathematics was causing schools to neglect such things as teaching students to be "good citizens... patriotic... and (to have) trust, civics, honesty, integrity." Other groups mentioned critical thinking skills as an important part of a good education; still others mentioned music, art, and simply learning to get along with others as opportunities that schools should provide.

Parent participants expressed considerably more tolerance for variations in outcomes for their own children than policymakers would allow. That is, parents seemed comfortable with the notion that some children perform better academically than others. Rather than ensure that every child scored as well as every other child on a test, parents wanted to ensure that schools could support the development of every child's unique talents and skills, whatever they were. There was concern expressed about the trend toward limiting options for noncollege-bound students and for those whose talents were less academic.

If policymakers want public education to be truly accountable to the public, they need to reframe accountability policies in ways that are meaningful to the public. As more and more schools are labeled "in need of improvement" under No Child Left Behind, the label itself will become meaningless to parents who are likely to continue making decisions about which schools their children attend on a very different set of criteria than academic performance criteria such as safety, discipline, and proximity to home. The desire for the education system to focus on more than test scores is best summed up by this participant's reflections on the Dialogue.

We shared our observations of inconsistencies between schools, and acknowledged that beyond the standards, we must foster enjoyment of learning, social skills, and many concepts within the realm of Human Interaction. These are NOT given the time or the value we should be giving them, considering our goals for a society of involved, functional citizens and healthy families. The overwhelming number of expectations; the mountain of standards that is given

² Rose, L. C. & Gallup, A. M. (2003, September). The 35th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85. issue #, 41–56.

the highest priority versus fostering the whole person, is what the education system must look at.

The public is looking for reassurance that schools are doing the job they expect them to do but annual standardized test scores do not give them that reassurance. They want multiple measures of performance and multiple ways for students to demonstrate their competencies. Policymakers should support research and development in the area of assessment in order to satisfy the need for a comprehensive, multifaceted assessment of student skills and knowledge that can still be used for accountability purposes. In the meantime, the public is likely to continue to resist attaching too much importance to the publicly-reported scores on the tests.

Education leaders also need to refine their communication to the public about accountability. Current accountability schemes, including No Child Left Behind, may have been oversold to the public, promising much more than they were meant to deliver. Policymakers need to make clear that measuring achievement is not, in itself, intended to improve achievement, but rather to focus attention on those students who need the most help. Moreover, if the policy community does not want education to be reduced to only “the three Rs,” it must work with the public to reform the system in ways that will allow individual students to develop their own potential while holding the adults in charge accountable in appropriate ways.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Ironically, the current high-stakes testing accountability environment, though intended in part to increase public awareness and involvement in education, might actually cause the public to be further disengaged from the process. There are several reasons for this.

First, the system of standards, assessment, and accountability is a highly technical one and difficult to interpret for the public. The general public does not understand the psychometrics associated with testing; they do not know the difference between “norm-referenced” and “criterion-referenced” tests and are not able to judge the quality of any particular assessment. Moreover, although states and districts have generally implemented a process that includes public input when developing standards, concepts such as “proficiency” and “benchmarks” can be confusing to parents who grew up with the bell curve. The technical nature of the process and discussions about it tend to intimidate and disenfranchise the lay public, further disengaging them from the process.

Second, as schools focus more and more on achieving prescribed test results, there will be a natural tendency to devote more time to instruction, possibly neglecting parent involvement. It takes time to create and implement a robust, meaningful, parent engagement program at any school. As teachers focus more on reading and mathematics instruction in preparation for annual tests, the time to create structured opportunities for parent involvement is diminished.

Finally, although we heard in the dialogues that accountability should be shared among parents, students, teachers, administrators, and the community at large, it was clear that participants did not know how to become involved in a deeper way. There is frequently an abundance of goodwill in communities toward their neighborhood school. There are people, with and without children in the schools, who are concerned and willing to help out, but they simply don’t know how to access the system and the system does not know how to incorporate them into it. Schools are a closed system, run according to an immutable format, often driven as much by the bus schedule as by actual educational or community needs. It is a system that is difficult to penetrate. Only the most

assertive, confident parent with plenty of time on his or her hands is likely to be able to participate in any meaningful way.

Education leaders need to reach out to the public. They need to engage the public in dialogue about school reform and accountability, and respond to the concerns expressed, or run the risk of having their accountability policies become irrelevant to the people the policies are intended to reassure. Participants in the Dialogues were uniformly appreciative of the opportunity to discuss these issues with others and expressed the hope that those making policy would hear their concerns and respond.

NEXT STEPS

Our experience with the dialogues suggests that the standards movement has reached a new stage in its evolution. The public no longer questions the wisdom of standards, assessments, and accountability *per se*, but, rather, questions whether or not the focus on accountability actually helps students reach the most important goals in their development. It is not only academic success that is on the minds of parents and the public. Dialogue participants express deep concern about students' civic-mindedness, sense of caring for others, flexibility and adaptability, work ethic, and creativity, as much as or, in some cases, more than, test scores. Although most participants do believe that test scores provide some evidence of the success or failure of schools, this is not the only measurement of interest to them. In the dialogues we observed, there was a consensus that test scores do not tell the whole story. In fact, many participants noted, even if all students reach “proficiency” as defined by tests by the year 2014, they could not be certain that these students had learned and developed in *all* the ways that society needs and expects.

Ultimately, the conversations turn to fundamental questions about the purpose of our educational system, particularly in light of preparing students to cope with the uncertainties of the future. Participants express concern about the rapid pace of change and the new knowledge and skills students will need to acquire to thrive in the 21st century. Discussion arises about the very nature of schooling — will it remain essentially as it is today, in buildings with children grouped into grades according to age, with one teacher to guide them? Or will the system become something few have imagined, much less discussed — one without the schools of today but perhaps with individualized learning plans for each student and a wide variety of ways (virtual and face-to-face) to reach goals and demonstrate proficiency? This is a discussion that should be nurtured in communities and is a question that McREL intends to pursue in our further work toward ensuring that educational leaders are prepared to meet the challenges ahead.

In 2005, McREL will move our National Dialogue work to a new frontier that focuses on the future of standards-based education 10 years from now. We will create scenarios for the future of education from a variety of perspectives and then share these with a national audience.

Scenarios are not predictions of the future. Rather, they are plausible stories about the world in which we may live and work a decade or more from now. They highlight large-scale forces that could “push” the future in one direction or another. Scenarios about the future of education are a tool for educators in planning for the future of learning systems. They help leaders make decisions today that position them and their organizations to be most effective in the future. They force leaders to look beyond the immediate crisis of the day and to contemplate how one’s “official” view of the future could be misguided and cause us to make decisions today that are counterproductive to critical achievement goals for students today and in the future.

McREL intends to create further opportunities for dialogue among diverse stakeholders about the implications of the possible scenarios and options for actions by educational leaders in order to be prepared to meet the challenges ahead. In this way, the goals and objectives of the National Dialogue project can continue to be pursued.

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A: EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE

The goals of the National Dialogue include:

- creating collaborative inquiry that involves the entire range of citizenry and seeks to offer solutions that represent the best thinking of a wide range of people across the nation;
- fostering an exchange of information and ideas at all levels of the system and among educators and stakeholders from across the nation on issues related to standards-based education; and
- helping all stakeholders create shared understanding about how to effectively implement standards-based reforms to realize the overarching goal of the standards movement — to help all students achieve high standards.

Toward these ends, the National Dialogue activities have included developing, field-testing, and disseminating a Collaborative Inquiry Process, gathering and disseminating insights from the dialogues to foster a nationwide exchange of ideas, and providing opportunities for stakeholders to develop a shared understanding about standards. Beyond the development phase of the National Dialogue materials (including solicitation of feedback and appropriate adjustments where indicated), it was determined that the National Dialogue should be assessed relative to the extent to which the materials and the process itself met the following goals:

- allowed for meaningful exchanges of information through conversation;
- enabled various levels of stakeholders to be engaged in conversations;
- provided a useful, appropriate, timely conversation with sustained benefits (participants anticipate using the information);
- facilitated the development of a shared understanding of standards-based education;
- facilitated the building of a bridge between community-level conversations and technical conversations; and
- facilitated a better understanding of other stakeholder perspectives.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

Specific evaluation questions were derived from the objectives of the National Dialogue. Anticipated outcomes of the project were evaluated utilizing criteria that reflected the utility of the dialogues (in terms of such factors as appropriateness, timeliness, anticipated future use) and the benefits of the dialogues (in terms of fostering shared understandings, fostering substantive knowledge on technical issues and fostering deeper appreciation of alternative perspectives and in terms of encouraging broad engagement).

These include:

- Were participants engaged?
- Was an open and respectful conversation maintained?

- Was the conversation meaningful? Was the conversation relevant (if so, in what ways)?
- Were different constituencies involved in the Dialogue?
- Has the conversation led to proposed actions (if appropriate)?
- Do participants have a shared understanding of standards-based education [SBE] (where appropriate, have participants learned more about SBE)?
- Did technical issues surface? Who was engaged?
- To what extent are participants engaged with substantive ideas associated with SBE (e.g., defining standards, benchmarks, issues of assessment) in nontechnical ways?
- To what extent do participants have a better understanding of fellow citizens' perspectives?

Table 1 details the relationship between overarching goals of the project and evaluation questions and data collection sources:

Table 1. Relationship between National Dialogue Goal, Evaluation Questions, and Data Sources

National Dialogue goal:	Associated evaluation questions:	Data Sources
Allowed for meaningful exchanges of information through conversation	Were participants engaged? Was an open and respectful conversation maintained? Was the conversation meaningful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site observations of dialogues • Participant and moderator interviews/follow-up surveys
Enabled various levels of stakeholders to be engaged in conversations	Were different constituencies involved in the Dialogue?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site observations of dialogues • On-site participant surveys
Provided a useful, appropriate, timely conversation with sustained benefits (participants anticipate using the information)	Was the conversation relevant (if so, in what ways)? Has the conversation led to proposed actions (if appropriate)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant and moderator interviews/follow-up surveys • On-site participant surveys
Facilitated the development of a shared understanding of standards-based education	Do participants have a shared understanding of SBE (where appropriate, have participants learned more about SBE)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site observations of dialogues • Participant and moderator interviews/follow-up surveys • On-site participant surveys
Facilitated the building of a bridge between community-level conversations and technical conversations	Did technical issues surface? Who was engaged? To what extent are participants engaged with substantive ideas associated with SBE (e.g., defining standards, benchmarks, issues of assessment) in non-technical ways?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site observations of dialogues • Participant and moderator interviews/follow-up surveys • On-site participant surveys

National Dialogue goal:	Associated evaluation questions:	Data Sources
Facilitated a better understanding of other stakeholder perspectives	To what extent do participants have a better understanding of fellow citizens' perspectives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site observations of dialogues • Participant and moderator interviews/follow-up surveys • On-site participant surveys

A variety of data collection methods were used to examine the evaluation questions;³ in some cases, more than one method was employed to address a given evaluation question in order to strengthen the credibility of the findings. Evaluation data included project documents and pre- and post-survey data (these surveys are included in the National Dialogue Community Conversation Framework: *Leaving No Child Behind: How Can We Help All Kids Achieve High Academic Standards?*). Four sites were identified as intensive study sites and as such, data collected included Dialogue observations, surveys, and follow-up conversations aimed at determining the extent to which each Dialogue goal was realized. The following section on Findings presents the data relevant for addressing each of the evaluation questions.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Question: Did the Dialogue allow for meaningful exchanges of information through conversation?

To address the first set of evaluation questions (*Were participants engaged? Was an open and respectful conversation maintained? Was the conversation meaningful?*), site observation data and participant and moderator follow-up data were examined.

Examining pre- to post-mean differences on the site surveys reveals slight increases on a number of items (see Table 2). Thus, after participating in the Dialogue, participants appeared to be slightly more concerned about a number of education issues.⁴ Particularly high levels of concern are apparent for items related to measurement and testing, with respondents indicating that the failure of test-driven reforms to address children's needs and the use of test results to shame and blame schools among their highest concerns.

When asked to identify other principles that should guide public education, survey respondents' remarks align with those heard in the Dialogue. This was the case for written comments before the Dialogue and after the Dialogue. In particular, respondents noted that accountability should be shared with parents and students, that education needs to maintain some semblance of individuality – though it also should maintain and keep high, explicit expectations for all students, that a student's home environment plays a role in their achievement, that resources are crucial, and that tests ought to be used in more diagnostic ways. Issues of equity were raised by a few respondents, but an overwhelming number of comments centered on finding ways to hold parents accountable for their child's education and finding ways to individualize curriculum to meet all student needs.

³ Because of the nature of the intervention, it was not possible or appropriate to design and evaluate outcomes of participants compared to outcomes of a nonparticipating comparison group. Therefore, the design of this evaluation study is a one-group, pre-post comparison of the effectiveness of the dialogue materials and the dialogue process and outcomes.

⁴ The mean difference between pre- and post-ratings for the item "Schools lack incentives to help all students achieve high standards" is significant at $p < .05$.

Table 2. Participant Concerns on Education Issues (Pre- and Post Surveys)

Question: How concerned are you about the following issues?	Pre		Post	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Test-driven reforms fail to focus on the needs of the whole child.	2.77	0.47	2.82	0.44
Tests results are being used to shame and blame schools.	2.77	0.48	2.81	0.46
Current accountability systems are taking away local control of schools.	2.52	0.63	2.56	0.58
Schools lack the resources they need to help all children achieve standards.	2.71	0.52	2.75	0.51
Schools have been following 'fads' instead of relying on what works.	2.43	0.68	2.46	0.67
Schools lack incentives to help all students achieve high standards.	2.16	0.78	2.29	0.73
Low expectations have let too many students fall through the cracks.	n/a	n/a	2.39	0.69

Scale = 1 (not at all concerned) to 3 (concerned)

During follow-up conversations and surveys, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that all participants were given an opportunity to engage. The mean rating for this question was 5⁵. Thus, participants uniformly agreed that they were able to engage in the conversation. In addition, during site observations, participants expressed gratitude to have been included in the conversation about educational standards in their community.

On the whole, moderators indicated that the participants were engaged. The following comments, extracted from follow-up moderator conversations provide a sense of the perceived level of participant engagement:

[Participants were] very involved, everyone spoke, [but we] ran out of time.

[Everyone was] fully engaged. Everyone was asking clarifying questions and giving thoughtful responses.

They were highly engaged. Evidence: They stayed and talked at the end. They spoke to their peers about it, they sent us follow up e-mails and calls. They brought the topic up in dialogues that occurred after the session.

Participants and moderators alike intimated that they were treated with respect and their voices were heard in the Dialogue. Thus, for instance, moderators suggested that because the facilitators were well trained, the conversational environment felt safe for participants. Moreover, one moderator noted that s/he heard "...many comments about the structure of the Dialogue providing safety and respect for their ideas."

During Dialogue observations, through follow-up conversations and through the post-Dialogue questionnaires, participants have noted that they find the conversations useful. Thus, when follow-up conversations and surveys queried *the extent to which participants agreed that the conversation was*

⁵ For all follow-up survey data, a five-point Likert scale was used, where 1 indicated 'not at all' and 5 indicated 'to a great extent.'

relevant to important issues about schooling and education, the mean rating was a 4.70. This high rating is reinforced by the following comments regarding the relevance of the standards-based dialogue:

Any conversation that focuses on what children actually experience in classrooms is relevant...

We shared our observations of inconsistencies between schools, and acknowledged that beyond the standards, we must foster enjoyment of learning, social skills, and many concepts within the realm of Human Interaction. These are NOT given the time or the value we should be giving them, considering our goals for a society of involved, functional citizens and healthy families. The overwhelming number of expectations; the mountain of standards that is given the highest priority versus fostering the whole person, is what the education system must look at.

We talked about the relevance of parent education at the earliest possible time. Every penny given to parent education is a pound of prevention.

The facilitator did a good job of encouraging everyone to participate (as did all of the participants) and kept us on task. I don't remember thinking that we were wasting time (as a matter of fact, we could have continued to discuss longer on most every item).

In addition, participants indicated that *the conversation was meaningful* (mean rating of 4.0) and agreed that *the conversation was useful* (mean rating 3.56). One follow-up comment captures the extent to which participants appreciated the opportunity to engage:

I really enjoyed listening to the others and gained a new insight into the youth of today! The dialogue is priceless and it helps me talk to the students of today and make their education meaningful.

Moderator perceptions of the utility of the conversation (meaningful and useful) provide additional support for the participant's own reflections, indicating that participants were pleased they were given the opportunity to engage in the topic and that they were able to parlay the National Dialogue conversation into other arenas:

I think the conversation was a unique opportunity for most of these folks to talk about a fairly complex topic.

[P]eople found the conversation meaningful and useful. In the context of [our community] initiative, [participants] brought elements of this evening's work in to later meetings.

However, not all moderators agreed, as evidenced by the misgiving of one moderator, "[Participants] feel that a lot of talk happens and no action." Such a sentiment was echoed in the conversations that we listened to during our site observations, with participants sometimes bemoaning the fact that their voices would be recorded and actions would be discussed, but in the end nothing would come of the conversation.

Question: Did the Dialogue enable various levels of stakeholders to be engaged in conversations?

Based on demographic data from site surveys, we were able to determine that different constituencies were involved in the conversations (*Were different constituencies involved in the Dialogue?*). Dialogues were attended by a broad range of interested citizens, including local business leaders, parents, teachers, counselors, principals, retirees, and in many cases, students. Although the majority of participants were White/Caucasian, this descriptive statistic must be accompanied with the caveat that one of our largest Dialogue sites in 2004 was in a rural area with very few community members and parents who were not White. Table 3 details the ethnicity of Dialogue participants.

Parent respondents were also asked to indicate whether their children attended a private or a public school; not surprisingly the majority of parents (94.6%) indicated that their children attended public schools. Finally, in the words of one respondent to a follow-up survey, “it was wonderful to have the community speak and interact. Young and old” – a comment drawing attention to the diversity of perspectives represented in the conversation.

Table 3. Ethnicity of participants

Ethnicity	N	%
African American	46	18.5
Asian American	2	.8
Hispanic	7	2.8
Native American	3	1.2
White	187	75.4
Other	3	1.2
Total	248	

Question: Did the Dialogue provide a useful, appropriate, timely conversation with sustained benefits (participants anticipate using the information)?

To address the third set of questions (*Was the conversation relevant [if so, in what ways]? and Has the conversation led to proposed actions, if appropriate?*), data from participant and moderator interviews and follow-up surveys as well as on-site participant surveys were examined.

Follow-up conversations with participants revealed that they are not always certain how they will utilize the information – those suggesting actionable agendas often relate that they anticipate telling their neighbors and friends about the conversation and hope to urge others to get involved in similar conversations in their community. Others did indicate that they have become more committed to helping schools raise money in tax elections and some even expressed that they feel a greater sense of confidence in themselves as educators and parents. For many, engaging in the Dialogue is not an unfamiliar activity for them – the people who voluntarily attend such meetings are the people who are already engaged in the education system.

Follow-up responses from moderators indicated that the conversations seemed relevant. For instance, an open-ended question regarding the relevance of the conversation included the following comments:

[The conversation was] very relevant. Everything [parents] hear is Standards these days and they don't know what that means for their children.

Yes, I don't think most of them would've have come otherwise.

Yes. Participants were there because they were looking for a better understanding of standards based education and to distinguish some of their concepts.

Although many of the proposed actions remained at a very general level, when we asked moderators whether the participants had engaged in any related activities following their participation, moderators suggested that some participants had followed up on how to open up and improve communication between parents and schools and that others had attempted to continue to engage their communities in dialogues and advisory groups. Importantly, one moderator noted that any actions associated with the National Dialogue – whatever these may be – would benefit from the “more objective approach to topics that include standards based education” fomented through participation in the conversation.

Question: Did the Dialogue facilitate the development of a shared understanding of SBE?

To address questions regarding shared understandings (*Do participants have a shared understanding of SBE? Where appropriate, have participants learned more about SBE?*), we examined data from site observations of Dialogues, participant and moderator follow-up interviews and follow-up surveys, and on-site participant surveys.

Based on overall mean ratings, on-site surveys revealed that, prior to the conversation, National Dialogue participants felt the strongest about issues associated with using test results in a diagnostic fashion (rather than a shaming of schools and students). On the other hand, participants considered the tying of consequences to test results as an incentive for improvement the least important of educational principles. While the latter of these principles remained the least important for participants following their engagement in the National Dialogue process, the highest rated principle (based on overall means) following the conversation was that all necessary resources should be provided to help students meet the standards. Such shifts are perhaps indicative that the conversations have led people to reflect on or reconsider their initial positions regarding a set of principles that have been proposed to help all students achieve high academic standards. Table 4 provides means and standard deviations for all items associated with principles for helping all students achieve high academic standards.

Table 4. Importance of Principles to Help Students Achieve High Academic Standards

How important is each of the following principles to you:	Pre		Post	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
We should provide all necessary resources to help students meet standards.	2.87	0.35	2.86	0.35
Standards should not become a “one-size-fits-all” school curricula.	2.69	0.54	2.66	0.58
Local districts and communities should have flexibility in setting and meeting standards.	2.54	0.61	2.41	0.61
Test results should identify areas of need, not shame schools or students.	2.91	0.29	2.82	0.42
Consequences should be tied to tests to give schools incentives to improve.	1.63	0.69	1.78	0.72
We must accept no excuses for students failing to achieve high standards.	2.01	0.71	2.03	0.72

Scale = 1 (not at all important) to 3 (very important)

Site surveys indicated that participants’ opinions about public policies regarding standards shifted following the conversation – from being less certain about what public policy on standards ought to be toward holding a more general sense or a definite sense of what those policies should be. Table 5 provides the percentage of respondents selecting each of the statements to describe their perspectives on standards policies both before and after participating in the conversation.

Table 5. Pre and Post Participant Perspectives on Standards Policies

Which statement best describes how you feel about our public policy to help all students achieve high standards?	% Pre	% Post
I am not at all certain what our public policy should be.	22.20	14.30
I have a general sense of what our public policy should be.	50.00	54.40
I have a definite opinion of what our public policy should be.	27.80	31.30

In a similar vein, participants were asked to reflect on three approaches to helping all children achieve high academic standards both before and after the Dialogue. These three approaches are aligned with those used to frame the National Dialogue conversations. Interestingly, the number of individuals who suggested they were unsure about the different approaches dropped for the first two options but remained constant for the third. An overwhelming number of Dialogue participants favor — both before and after participating — increased resources to help schools and students achieve. Table 6 provides these data.

Table 6. Pre- and post- Reflections on Policies for Achieving High Academic Standards

How do you feel about these approaches to making policy on helping all students achieve high academic standards:	Pre			Post		
	% Favor	% Oppose	# Not sure	% Favor	% Oppose	# Not sure
We should focus on results & achievement, <i>even if</i> it means schools must narrow their curricula or lose some degree of local control.	29.60	70.40	71	32.50	67.50	26
We should provide schools w/ adequate support to help all students achieve standards, <i>even if</i> it means redistributing resources or raising taxes.	92.40	7.60	34	91.50	8.50	26
Communities should set their own standards, <i>even if</i> that means their schools are of uneven quality or lack the 'common school' experience.	33.80	66.20	94	36.70	63.30	93

During follow-up conversations/surveys, when we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they felt they had a strong understanding of standards-based education prior to participating in the conversation, the mean rating, participants rated themselves a 4.55. It is important to bear this in mind when one examines (the mean rating) for the extent to which participants felt they left the conversation with an improved understanding of standards-based education. For this question, participants indicated that they did not feel that they learned that much (mean = 2.90). However, as one participant noted, “I think that most people do not understand what 'standards-based' means. The dialogue was useful in making it more clear to some what it means.”

Although it is difficult to ascertain whether participants actually reached a shared understanding of standards-based education through their participation in the conversation, moderators suggested that alignment on some issues was evident — for some, this centered on the need for additional communication among schools, parents, and communities, for others shared understandings were around an agreed upon vision for education priorities. Other issues — notably the role of standards and the concomitant and requisite actions to enable and enforce standards — failed to meet the benchmark of a shared understanding. Arguably, however, the role and goal of the National Dialogue project is not to enforce or even strive for consensus-building around such broad issues as what role standards ought to play in educating youth; rather the role and goal of the Dialogue is simply to bring to the fore the disparate issues, thereby ensuring that different voices are given an opportunity to be heard. In other words, reaching a shared understanding is different from reaching agreement on priorities and next steps. One moderator summed this important sentiment up by suggesting that “everyone's opinion was heard and respected, but not necessarily agreed upon.”

Question: Did the Dialogue facilitate the building of a bridge between community-level conversations and technical conversations?

It is also important to determine whether the participants in the dialogue are comfortable engaging. Oftentimes, conversations on standards-based education and testing and assessment turn on very technical issues associated with benchmarks, alignment, or the psychometric properties of testing instruments. We were curious whether *technical issues surface* and if they did, *who was engaged?* In addition, we asked: *To what extent are participants engaged with substantive ideas associated with SBE (e.g., defining standards, benchmarks, issues of assessment) in nontechnical ways?*

During follow-up conversations and surveys, participants were asked to reflect on the extent to which they were able to understand the conversation, including any technical issues that arose. Participants indicated that they felt comfortable in their understanding, rating this item a 4.45. In addition, moderators noted that they did not feel as though technical details about standards or testing “took over” the conversations. Observations of the dialogues are also useful to consider in learning about whether substantive issues were addressed in ways that were not overly complicated. Over the past year, we’ve heard citizens engage in a number of dialogues on standards-based education, sometimes hinting at more technical issues, but seemingly using care in selecting their language so that the issues raised are comprehensible by all members of the dialogue. Thus, while the construct validity of a state test might have been questioned, the issues were raised using everyday terms. Likewise, standards-based conversations tended to focus on substantive issues about helping all children succeed and accountability conversations typically centered on how to ensure that accountability provisions are broadly understood and applied (e.g., to school personnel but also to parents, students, and sometimes community members).

Question: Did the Dialogue facilitate a better understanding of other stakeholder perspectives?

In terms of whether participants felt that they had a better understanding of fellow citizens’ perspectives following the conversation, follow-up conversations and surveys revealed that participants agreed (though not strongly) that they learned about each others’ perspectives (mean = 3.50). Others’ perspectives can sometimes be unexpected — encounters with such different, diverse perspectives have the potential to engender self-questioning and self-reflection. Thus, during follow-up with participants we asked whether there were any perspectives expressed during the Dialogue that surprised them. Although several participants indicated that they did not hear anything that they did not expect, the following comments are indicative of the areas that provided new information or perspectives or that participants found particularly intriguing:

I am always grateful to the insight provided by the students.

One woman said that it was ok to teach to the test, but we have to agree what the test was. That was food for thought.

How much high school has changed since I attended.

I was bothered to hear that some teachers did not like “high expectations” for their students — isn't that what we should all be striving for?

I was amazed that some educators can be numb to the social/emotional needs of our students...we cannot look at children as merely test passers...

People teaching continuation/alternative education, as well as our schools with high numbers of ELL student, have incredible challenges which the system is not significantly addressing. They MUST have more support to begin meeting the standards with their populations.

Since I've been through a variation of meetings like this, I felt that I'd heard much of it prior. It is always interesting to hear from the students. In our group they felt “over tested,”, but also saw the benefits of having high standards.

Moderators agreed that participants learned about each other’s viewpoints — and importantly, that participants learned about perspectives from those who are in different socioeconomic strata, different developmental periods as parents, and so forth than themselves.

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

On the whole, the evaluation revealed that the National Dialogue met each of its overall goals. Participants and moderators reported high levels of engagement and open, respectful conversations that were meaningful and relevant. Moreover, demographically speaking, the conversations drew together diverse constituencies with varied perspectives, and although participants did not always reach consensus or completely understand one another’s perspectives, the exposure to varied understandings is considered crucial. Finally, participants did not report feeling disenfranchised because of technical issues — if anything, participants were deeply engaged in the ideas associated with standards-based education. Although actions and outcomes at the community level directly emanating from Dialogue participation are not discernable, arguably the Dialogue served its purposes well — particularly toward the end of getting the public engaged in the conversation and facilitating their discovery process in terms of their own perspectives regarding education and their fellow citizens’ perspectives regarding education. Table 7 reiterates the goals of the National Dialogue, the evaluation questions, and our determination regarding the achievement of the goal.

Table 7. Relationship between National Dialogue Goal, Evaluation Questions, and Data Sources

National Dialogue goal:	Evaluation questions:	Goal Met?
Allowed for meaningful exchanges of information through conversation	Were participants engaged? Was an open and respectful conversation maintained? Was the conversation meaningful?	✓

National Dialogue goal:	Evaluation questions:	Goal Met?
Enabled various levels of stakeholders to be engaged in conversations	Were different constituencies involved in the dialogue?	✓
Provided a useful, appropriate, timely conversation with sustained benefits (participants anticipate using the information)	Was the conversation relevant (if so, in what ways)? Has the conversation led to proposed actions (if appropriate)?	✓
Facilitated the development of a shared understanding of SBE	Do participants have a shared understanding of SBE (where appropriate, have participants learned more about SBE)?	✓
Facilitated the building of a bridge between community-level conversations and technical conversations	Did technical issues surface? Who was engaged? To what extent are participants engaged with substantive ideas associated with SBE (e.g., defining standards, benchmarks, issues of assessment) in non-technical ways?	✓
Facilitated a better understanding of other stakeholder perspectives	To what extent do participants have a better understanding of fellow citizens' perspectives?	✓

ATTACHMENT 1: CONVERSATION FRAMEWORK VIDEOTAPE

ATTACHMENT 2: PARTICIPANT GUIDE/SURVEY INSTRUMENT

ATTACHMENT 3: MODERATOR AND RECORDER GUIDE