Are some schools unsuccessful at connecting with constituents because they don’t know what they need to do, or are they unsuccessful because they really don’t want input from their public and community partners in the first place? As we reflected on our collective 86 years of experience in public schools, each of us recalled a seminal moment when it became clear that the actions school leaders take may have profound and lasting effects on their constituents. If school leaders are thoughtful and reflective, these seminal moments will also profoundly affect their practice.

**Mark Mitchell’s Story**

As a school superintendent, passing bonds for new buildings is a very important part of the job, and working with prominent community members to garner support is essential to achieving success at the polls. One day, I had lunch with a successful former banker in my school district who was known throughout the community as a self-made millionaire with close ties to all members of the community. Bob had started at the bottom of the banking business, beginning as a janitor during the late 1930s and working his way up to teller, assistant cashier, cashier, loan officer, and vice-president. Finally, 30 years after he entered the workforce, he became the primary owner and
chairman of the board of the local bank. He based his business on hard work, strong ethics, and “trusting men at their word.”

Bob had wonderful, insightful stories to tell about the history of the community and the way that my school constituency viewed events within the district. He was always the first to volunteer for steering committees and was willing to provide not only moral but also financial support for the initiatives of the school board. During lunch, Bob was telling me about the hard times of the 1920s and ’30s when he became very pensive. “Mark, did you know that school was very hard for me when I was a child?” he asked. “I was a student who tried hard, but reading was very difficult, and I was never able to keep up with the other students.”

He hesitated. “I have told very few people this, but I think it is important that you know I was a high school dropout. When I was in 10th grade, I walked into the principal’s office and told him I would not be back. The principal said it was probably best for me to get a job, and get on with my life, because school really wasn’t my cup of tea.

“I will never forget that moment as long as I live. At first I was angry that no one had faith in me to be successful in school, but later, I felt a relief come over me that I had not felt in all of
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my school years. It dawned on me that every day I went to school, someone told me what a failure I was. They told me that I was not as good as my classmates, and that I would never amount to anything because I was ‘slow.’ I hated going to school, because I knew that I could not do the things the other students could do. I knew that they would be getting stars on their papers, and I would only get red marks.

“When I walked into that principal’s office and quit school, I only failed once. When I walked out that door, no longer did anyone remind me that I was a failure. I got a job that I could do and went on with my life with no one comparing me to someone who they thought was better.”

I was stunned by what Bob had just shared with me. Here was one of the district’s strongest and most dedicated supporters—an individual who had every right to turn his back on public school, just like public school had turned its back on him. Here was a self-made man who failed in school, yet made education a priority in his life.

I asked Bob why school was so important to him now. He replied simply that his life was an exception. He beat the odds and became successful, while most young people will not be able to succeed without “proper schooling.”

I will always remember his statement. It reminds me of the importance of ensuring that every student experiences success in school. It reminds me that educators must make a direct and deliberate effort to teach all students and not compare one to another. Bob’s story is a reminder that educators are only as successful as the people whom they mentor or teach. If students fail, then educators have also failed.

Linda Winter’s Story

In the late 1990s, I was the director of student affairs for a 30,000-student school district in Appalachia. One of my major responsibilities was to chair a placement committee that reviewed the cases of students who needed special services, such as placement in an alternative or homebound programs or in special programs using distance learning. Many of these students had violated school policy, but many others simply were not served well in the traditional school environment. The committee was composed of standing members and invited members—such as the student, the parents, and school representatives—for each case under review.

The weekly agenda always filled the entire day, and a new case was scheduled every 15 minutes. Cases frequently, and unpredictably, ran long, requiring some students and families to wait as long as two hours for their turn. The scene in the hallway at the central office was one of patients in a doctor’s waiting room about to be told bad news. Angry students, anxious families, and school administrators crowded together, knowing that no one was invited to attend this committee unless a student’s education was about to be disrupted.

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The following protocol has been used widely in a number of disciplines to guide thinking when a significant event occurs, especially when the event’s importance may not be immediately discernible. These steps will help you lead your staff members to understand more fully the meaning in important incidents when they happen in your school. Ask everyone to reflect on these key questions individually and then discuss their thoughts as a group.

**WHAT?** Describe what stood out to you most about the incident. What happened? Why did this happen? Can you view the incident from each participant’s point of view? Include your thoughts and reactions in some detail.

**SO WHAT?** Why might this incident be important? What might it say about your own attitudes and thinking? What are your assumptions about the participants’ motivation or thinking? Are there other possibilities you should consider?

**NOW WHAT?** Reflect on how you can use what you have learned about this incident in your practice. What might you and your colleagues do differently next time? What policies or procedures need reviewed? Can you identify needed staff training? Should teachers, staff members, and administrators communicate with their constituencies differently? How might good educational leadership prevent or address such concerns?
hind schedule. As soon as we made introduc-
tions, this woman said, “I have something to
say before we get started.”

I expected her to begin discussing her son’s
issues, but instead, she said, “I make $6 an
hour. One night a week, I treat my children to
pizza, because it is one of their few treats. That
pizza costs me $12. I have just spent two hours
away from work to attend this meeting, which
means my kids won’t have pizza night this
week. I hope whatever we do at this meeting is
worth my children missing pizza night.”

After that meeting, the members of the
committee often reminded one another of
her plea. We were summoning parents to a
meeting—commanding them, actually, be-
cause their child was generally out of school
until this committee convened—and we had
given little consideration to any hardship this
might create for working or poor parents. Yet
in addition to the problem this student had
cau sed his mother, we had added another
burden to her already stressful life. This parent
put in perspective what our convenience cost
her and her children.

Mary Martin’s Story

My daughter’s favorite subject is math. In grade
10, Emily had a “tough” math teacher who had
the reputation of being no-nonsense, and I was
delighted. For the first time, I saw Emily putting
a lot of time in on her homework, but before
long frustration got the best of her and math
was no longer fun. She went to the teacher’s
after-school tutoring because I made her.

Emily seemed to dread class more and
more every day. As we rode to school one
morning, she confided, “Mom, I know the
math. I can do the work. I just can’t get it
finished in the time she gives us.” Then she
told me about the last test she had taken the
week before. She felt like she was doing well,
when suddenly (in her view), the teacher
announced that papers would be collected
in five minutes. Emily panicked because she
had one whole page to complete. She finished
the problem she was on and then just started
marking answers—better to guess than to leave
a problem blank.

Sure enough, she failed. She missed 2
problems on the first five pages. She missed
12 on the last page. I encouraged Emily to talk
with her teacher, but she said that the teacher
would not have time. I suggested that she talk
with the teacher during after-school tutoring,
and reluctantly, she agreed to try.

Emily explained to the teacher that she
was struggling with the time limits, not with
doing the math. She explained how the errors
were usually on the last page, because she just
marked answers. The teacher told her, “You’re
not special. You can do the work just like ev-
everyone else. You have no excuses. Why are you
slower than everybody else?”

I told Emily that I would come by the class-
room one afternoon to pick her up from tutor-
ing. I wanted to thank the teacher for working
with Emily. I would have said, “I know Emily
is struggling and frustrated. I’ll be happy to do
anything I can to help, but I really appreciate
your special effort with her. Not many teach-
ers would stay late one day a week to help
students.” My comments might have taken 30
seconds. I wanted her to know that she and
Emily had my support.

As I was on my way to the school, Emily
called me. She was upset and asked me not
to come into the building, saying the teacher
had demanded to know what she needed her
mommy to say for her. “Emily,” the teacher
told her, “you are in high school and you need
to handle your own problems.” Then Emily
told me that the teacher would not see me that
day; I would have to call and schedule a con-
ference through a guidance counselor, perhaps
in a couple of weeks.

I was furious. But I, too, am a professional
educator. I was beginning to see why parents
disappear when their kids go to high school.
Many teachers don’t want parents around. This
was just enough of a rub for me that I went
in anyway. But instead of offering my thanks,
I pushed for a conference. Reluctantly, she
scheduled it for the next day. Was it produc-
tive? Maybe.

However, the lesson for my daughter oc-
curred during the conference. When asked who
was giving her a hard time about not finishing
the work, Emily went silent. Later she told me, “Mom, I couldn’t tell her that she had been the one putting me down. I couldn’t admit how much her comments hurt.”

Summary
Dewey (1938) writes that “every experience affects for better or worse the attitudes which help decide the quality of future experiences” (p. 37). Educators continually “collect” experiences that shape their philosophies. But parents and students and other constituents also collect experiences with public education, and—for sometimes better but often worse—their future attitudes and support for public education are decided by those experiences. If school leaders are serious about connecting with their constituents, they must honestly evaluate every interaction to ask what messages they are delivering and reflect on how those messages might be received. And they must always remember and remind others that the public schools are the public’s schools. 

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