

**VOICES FOR THE  
COMMON GOOD  
AMERICA  
SPEAKS OUT ON  
EDUCATION**



**LIVE UNITED**

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# FOREWORD

STERLING SPEIRN, PRESIDENT AND CEO, W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION

“WE NEED TO LOOK AT THE CHILD AS A WHOLE PERSON, NOT JUST AS A STUDENT.”

“ALL KIDS SHOULD HAVE THE SAME OPPORTUNITIES.”

“THE SCHOOLS CAN’T DO IT ALL.”

“IT IS THE COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE THAT MAKES OUR SCHOOLS WORK.”

“PUBLIC SCHOOLS HAVE TO FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGE.”

*These comments came from just a handful of the many citizens participating in conversations about education as part of United Way’s groundbreaking Campaign for the Common Good. People from different backgrounds and beliefs met last fall in dozens of communities across the nation and engaged in truly open, honest and lively dialogue about their hopes and dreams for our nation’s children.*

*This report—combined with the focus groups and nationwide survey conducted by United Way—reveals a rich range of perspectives on the challenges facing our children, our schools and our communities and ideas on how to transform our education system and help all children achieve success.*

**“...we believe that the path to improving schools is one that includes the voices and participation of the community being served.”**

*But among the great diversity of voices gathered, there was one common message: **People from all walks of life care about education, see its impact on their community and are ready to work together to improve both.***

*Regardless of who they are, where they live, or what they do, everyday Americans see good schools and good communities as inextricably linked. They see the impact of education on their local community and, conversely, the need for their entire local community to take responsibility for the quality of their children’s education.*

*And while they clearly have the desire to take action, many are unsure how or whether they can make a real difference—and want to step forward only if they can.*

*The question for leaders and organizations of this country working on education at all levels—community, state and national—is: How do we help people make good on their desire?*

*The W.K. Kellogg Foundation supports this work because we believe that the path to improving schools is one that includes the voices and participation of the community being served. Our funding supports a goal of “success by third grade,” and this is defined by a host of indicators, including the active engagement of community helping to improve education for its youngest members. The voices we heard from in this report echo this.*

*These findings tell us that people want a new relationship with their schools but don’t know how to make it happen. They know our education system needs to be transformed but understand there is no silver bullet solution, even when some organizations and leaders want to push the quick and easy fix.*

*And they agree that we can’t place the entire burden on schools. We need to take a whole child and whole community approach.*

*For us at the Kellogg Foundation, this means ensuring the emotional, social, cognitive, physical, cultural and civic development of young children, ages 0-8. Like United Way and many of those who joined in these conversations, we believe that the goal of creating educated kids cannot be reached without an equal focus on creating healthy kids and secure families.*

*We believe that you can’t bring about real change unless organizations and leaders create pathways for everyday people to act and make a real difference together. And you can’t do that unless you really listen to the people who are affected by the problems you are trying to address.*

*That’s what these conversations about education—and the future conversations planned by United Way—are all about: inviting individuals in communities across America to the table as equal partners so we can hear—and carefully consider—how they see the challenges that affect them most directly and together figure out how they can be actively involved in the solutions.*





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- WHEN YOU IMPROVE SCHOOLS, YOU IMPROVE COMMUNITIES—AND VICE VERSA
- PEOPLE FEEL DISCONNECTED FROM SCHOOLS
- INSTILLING VALUES IS JUST AS IMPORTANT TO PEOPLE AS TEACHING ACADEMICS
- WE'VE REACHED A TURNING POINT IN EDUCATION
- PEOPLE WANT TO WORK TOGETHER ON THIS BUT AREN'T SURE WHAT TO DO



“ Open lines of communication between the ones who make the policy and the ones who the policy affects.”

In 2008, United Way announced the Goals for the Common Good—a call to action for individuals and organizations across America to raise their hands in support of ambitious goals in three target areas that will significantly improve our nation by 2018:

- **EDUCATION:** Cut by half the number of young people who drop out of high school
- **INCOME:** Cut by half the number of lower-income families that lack financial stability
- **HEALTH:** Increase by a third the number of youths and adults who are healthy and avoid risky behaviors

Starting with a focus on education, United Ways around the country went out into neighborhoods in the fall of 2010 to listen to everyday people because we believe that these voices matter and have been largely absent from the public discourse on this critical issue. These conversations focused on people’s aspirations for their communities, for education, and the challenges they see in helping our children reach their potential in life.

These conversations took place in nearly 40 communities. What we heard from 17 of those communities—totaling more than 150 small group conversations—formed the basis of this report. At the same time, United Way Worldwide commissioned six focus groups and a national poll to add additional texture to the conversations.

*Some important ideas emerged from this work:*

## When you improve schools, you improve communities—and vice versa.

When schools are not doing well, according to people we heard from, crime goes up, you can’t get good jobs and it affects safety and well-being. “The community doesn’t flourish,” one person stated. Another person from a different part of the country said, “You lose that community when you don’t have neighborhood schools.” A person from yet a different conversation added, “Having good schools keeps kids off the streets.” And finally, another person—this one from a smaller, rural community, said, “A big part of our school system is our community. It is the community as a whole that makes our schools work.”

*From the national poll:*

- 62 percent say there are not enough community activities
- 91 percent agree “we as a community have to take greater responsibility for what’s happening with our children.”

# 51% HAVE VOLUNTEERED IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS

65% SAY THEY ARE WILLING TO VOLUNTEER

## 88% AGREE THAT “GOOD PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE THE

### People feel disconnected from schools.

One person from the Midwest said people “don’t feel welcomed.” Another person, this one from the South, suggested that we need to “open lines of communication between the ones who make the policy and the ones who the policy affects.”

#### *From the national poll:*

- “Challenges with the school” was ranked as the top reason kids left school (37 percent)
- 92 percent agree “we should work to make sure lower income school districts get more funding from the state” (52 percent strongly agree)
- Minorities in particular expressed concern about unequal funding between urban and suburban/rural schools

### Instilling values is just as important to people as teaching academics.

“There has got to be more responsibility,” one person said. “Kids are not working as hard today.” Another person in a different conversation said, “We have got to teach common decency.” A third individual suggested, “We should be more responsible at home,” and asked: “Who teaches respect, morals and work ethic?”

#### *From the national poll:*

- When given a list of common challenges in education and asked to rate each of them on a scale of 0 to 10, “declining moral values” received an average rating of 7.0 and was ranked near the top of the list. Other highly rated challenges included “disrespectful young” and “not enough role models”
- 86 percent of respondents agree (almost half, 48 percent, agree strongly) that “our faith communities need to play a greater role in helping children succeed.” And when it comes to whom respondents trust to give them information about getting involved in the community, respondents place teachers and education professionals and their religious leaders (32 percent each) at the top of the list, far ahead of other sources of information
- 57 percent say the “biggest hurdle to building strong communities ... have more to do with decline in our moral values.” This even in the midst of an economic downturn

### We’ve reached a turning point in education.

People feel that we are lagging severely when it comes to education. “Public schools have to fundamentally change,” one person from a mid-sized community in the South said. Another person, this one from the Mid-Atlantic, said, “Education is so important, our kids are falling so far behind, you’ve got to do something.” People describe being “disappointed” and “discouraged”





## FOUNDATION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM™

with how education is going. “It doesn’t seem to be doing too well,” said one person. Another individual from a large urban school district gave the local system “2 out of 10.”

### *From the national poll:*

- 50 percent say public schools are getting worse
- 29 percent say they are concerned that their child will drop out
- 88 percent agree that “good public schools are the foundation of the American dream” (53 percent strongly agree)

## People want to work together on this but aren’t sure what to do.

Public involvement is so important according to participants that a few people we heard from even suggested mandatory involvement. People see involvement in schools as crucial—and eroding. “People adopt freeways all day long,” a person from the West Coast said. “How about adopting a school?” In another part of the country, an individual echoed these sentiments, saying “Education is a complete system. Parents have to take more ownership of it.”

### *From the national poll:*

- 51 percent have volunteered in the last 12 months
- People say they are willing to volunteer (average of 6.5 out of 10)

- Lack of parental involvement is top concern when it comes to public school (average of 7.4 out of 10)
- A big challenge is that Americans say they just don’t have time to volunteer. At the top of the list that respondents give for not spending time volunteering in the community is “Too many other obligations with family or work” (40 percent say this is the reason). Just 19 percent say health limitations stop them from volunteering, which is the second most frequent explanation.

### So how do all of things people told us add up? Here are some of the take-aways:

- The time is right for education mobilization; the intrinsic link between education and community issues makes this a ripe issue for many different kinds of organizations to work on
- Schools have a tremendous opportunity to reconnect to their communities and build trust at a time when people are hungry for it—and want to be on schools’ side
- Programs and strategies for helping children succeed must be aligned to the total needs of the child—academic, physical, social-emotional and others
- Everyday individuals believe fixing education is a complex issue that doesn’t have a “silver bullet” solution
- People are looking for organizations that can help create clear pathways for people to act that are tied to large-scale change



**“It is the community as a whole  
that makes our schools work.”**



# INTRODUCTION

*Countless studies and volumes of research exist that assess the dimensions of educational challenges and offer approaches for making headway against them. In fact, United Way Worldwide has compiled its own body of research-based strategies for each of these goal areas.*

*But when you get beyond the research, beyond the experts, beyond the “Inside-the-Beltway” chatter and policy debates, what are everyday individuals across America saying about these important issues—issues that they experience in very real, very personal ways on a daily basis? How do they think about and talk about the way these issues impact their lives and the lives of their families and neighbors? If we stop to listen, what can they tell us about how to really go at these problems in a way that will make a difference in their communities?*

*Starting with a focus on education, United Way reached into neighborhoods to listen to people in the fall of 2010 because we believe that these voices matter—as much if not more than others. But for the most part, they have been largely absent from the public discourse, the debates and the evening news programs. We often see the everyday person used merely as a prop to advance an agenda. How often do organizations and leaders take the time to really listen to what people are telling us and to think about the implications of those voices for the work we are undertaking?*

*Raising up the voices of individuals across America and engaging people in a dialogue about the implications of what they are saying for the choices we’re making, the strategies we’re executing and policies we’re pursuing is what these conversations—and this report—is all about.*

*If we reflect back with integrity what we heard, and people can see themselves in those words, we believe we can call people to action around work that ties to their deeply held aspirations—and together we can truly begin to make real, lasting change around the issues we face.*

*This report tells a story based on the real words that people used to talk about the issues they face in conversations that focused on people’s aspirations both for their community and for education. These conversations (the notes from many of which were shared by local United Ways to develop this report) took place in dozens of communities across the country, engaging thousands of individuals from all walks of life. United Ways and their volunteers went into urban and rural neighborhoods, places of worship, local businesses, community centers, libraries and schools. And in small conversations of usually no more than a dozen or so people, they listened.*

**If you could sum up what we heard it would be this: People from all walks of life care about education, see its impact on their community and are ready to work together to improve both.**

*How will we respond?*



# ABOUT THIS REPORT

*This report is divided into two main sections. In the first, we present findings from community conversations held throughout the United States. In the second, we discuss some key implications of those findings.*

*Throughout, you will hear the voices of everyday individuals across America talking about community and about education. You will read stories of some standout initiatives that illustrate some of the important findings. And, you will see data from a national poll conducted to further examine Americans' views on the connection between education and community—especially in challenged areas where change appears most needed.*

*The community conversations on which this report is based were convened by local United Ways in 17 communities around the United States. In all, more than 150 conversations took place with thousands of participants, and reflections on those discussions were shared with United Way Worldwide. The community conversations were 90-minute to 2-hour discussions using a conversation format designed to explore participants' views and aspirations when it comes to community and education.*

*In addition to the community conversations conducted by local United Ways, United Way Worldwide commissioned six focus group conversations using the same conversation guide. These took place in Billings, MT; Chicago, IL; Detroit, MI; Los Angeles, CA; New York City, NY; and Washington, DC.*

*Finally, to confirm and support what we learned from the community conversations and focus groups, United Way Worldwide also commissioned a national poll on community mobilization and education in January 2011. The poll was conducted over six nights of calling. The national sample consisted of 1,000 phone call respondents in areas particularly challenged from the standpoint of high school graduation rates after controlling for poverty. There were an additional 200 interviews in challenged districts in exclusively rural areas. The poll also included 600 control interviews nationally of all areas, regardless of graduation or poverty rates.*

**“The country can’t survive without a system that’s going to fulfill the promise of public education.”**

*- Education Support Professional*

# WHAT WE LEARNED

## People tell a clear story in these community conversations

They strongly believe you can't separate education from the community. When they talk about education, they also talk about community and vice versa. People see the issue as highly complicated and interconnected with other community challenges. They seem always to come back to the basic point that our communities will rise or fall depending on how we educate and prepare our kids for life.

But, while this connection is clear, people at the same time say they feel shut out of schools and as a result, aren't sure if schools really understand what's going on out in the community. These people say they feel that, when it comes to education, we are not focusing on the right things. While children need to learn fundamental skills and knowledge, they more importantly need to develop a better sense of values. People are concerned that we do not teach fundamental values like kindness, generosity and responsibility anymore, neither within the schools nor (they fear) in the community and at home.

People say that, in order to change things, we have to have the entire community involved. They say it's not just up to the schools. It's up to all of us. They believe we have reached an important turning point in education, but are unsure what to do about it. The path forward is unclear.

The issues people bring up relative to education, the way they talk about and understand the issue, their aspirations and what they see as

our critical challenges to helping children succeed, echo what we're hearing in the national discourse. But their voices add a layer of depth to the conversation that is missing and important. What we're hearing is that a lot of the issues young people are facing are simply not being adequately discussed or addressed in the solutions being offered by the "experts" to improve educational outcomes.

## When you improve schools, you improve communities—and vice versa.

Good schools and good communities go hand in hand. When asked what their most important community issue was, one person from the Midwest summed it up by saying, "Schools."

When schools are not doing well, according to the people we heard from, crime goes up, you can't get good jobs and it affects safety and well-being. "The community doesn't flourish," a person from the Northeast said. "It's like you're planting a seed, but if you don't water it and you don't fertilize it, you're just going to have a seed with dirt on it." Another person from another part of the country said, "You lose that community when you don't have neighborhood schools."

## Seeking Safety

People in community conversations pointed to many problems in the community and slipped easily from community to school and back in discussing them. Topping the list of issues for both areas: safety. Community safety is highly important for all participants—almost the first thing people want to talk about when discussing their community.

Many participants said they experience violence in the community on a personal level. In two conversations in two different urban areas of the country, for instance, a majority of participants reported witnessing or being a victim of violence—murder, rape or robbery—in the last year. “The only people that have pride in the community are the gangs right now,” said one person. “You’ve got gangs raising kids.”

The concern for safety, though, is not limited to urban areas. A person we heard from in a rural community said, “It just seems like lately, there’s shootings and there’s crime and there’s ... nice neighborhoods where your homes are broken into. And it just seems like it’s just becoming sort of tough. It’s tougher here than I remember it.”

Worry about safety and crime is an important factor in people’s feelings about their communities and about public schools. In the national poll, they give “rising crime and violence” a 6.7 (on a scale of 0 to 10) in terms of its importance as a concern in the community, and they say that “too much bullying and violence in the schools” is a problem (6.5 on a scale from 0 to 10).

Better education, participants said, can lead directly to more safety in the community. “Having good education keeps kids off the streets,” said one person we heard from. Another person from the same community described what would make a better school:



“A safe school where the kids don’t have to run and duck and duck and hide.” In another community, a person said, “If the kids want to be at school, that will help the violence. Kids who should be at school are doing crime.”

Beyond the benefits they see to community safety, people said when schools are doing well, property values go up, people take pride in themselves, people are more productive and “You have a happier society.”

The relationship is two-way. While better education can foster a better community, people also say a better community can foster better education. In the national poll, 91 percent agree that “we as a community have to take greater responsibility for what’s happening with our children.” A person from a rural Western community said, “A big part of our school system is our community. It is the community as a whole that makes our schools work.” Another person from a large urban area echoed a similar sentiment. “You don’t want to go to school in a neighborhood that’s a slum neighborhood. Maybe if they improve the neighborhood, maybe it would make the school better.”

In one of our conversations with youth participants in the Twin Cities, a young man discussed his feelings about safety, prosperity and resiliency in his community of North Minneapolis. He reminded us that fear underlies every community problem we are trying to tackle. His narrative was full of violent experiences and yet, his spirit was full of hope and solutions. He urged us to focus on creating vibrant schools and increasing support to programs like AVID, Upward Bound and service learning. He urged us to focus on increasing the number of youth workers and engaged parents. He encouraged us to focus on school-wide anti-racism efforts and to harness the resourcefulness and resiliency that flourishes in historically-oppressed communities. The importance of creating spaces where youth are loved, trusted and empowered was evident in everything this young man shared with us. “When your parents let you down, you need someone else to scoop you up. Right now, we’ve got gangs scooping up our kids. Is that what we want?”

— *Greater Twin Cities United Way*

## Education Is the Key to Community Change

Education is the linchpin of positive change on a personal and community level, according to these participants. Indeed, in the national poll 88 percent of respondents agree that “good public schools are the foundation of the American dream” (53 percent agree strongly). People spoke easily of education’s importance on the personal level. “Education is independence,” said one individual from the Midwest. Another said, “Education is choices and hope.”

One person we heard from described what happens when a person lacks education: “You have to teach [kids] the consequences if they don’t get a good education, the consequences of that which is low-paying jobs and poverty. And an education could take you really far—places you’ve never been before.” He paused and continued, “Education is like water. It is vital.” Another testified to the personal power of education: “I’ve been able to see firsthand what a high school diploma and a college diploma can get you,” he said.

People also said they see a connection between education and community, beyond the safety. They said that better education can improve the sense of community. One person made a strong

case for a connection between school, community and home life: “It affects what happens in the community, what happens in the school. It affects you all day long.” Another person in the same conversation emphasized the school-community connection: “My granddaughter, she’s only in the first grade, but she’s been invited to umpteen birthday parties. I know that doesn’t seem like a big deal, but it really is. You know, you meet the other parents, ... the kids are bonding and you see how they interact ... I think it’s going to make their relationship stronger.” And, another person from a different community said, “[We’re] working together, we’re working for one common goal, to help our children, and help improve the school, which then brings a better sense of community, you know? Because if our kids go to school together, in some way, shape or fashion, we’re from the same community.”

## People feel disconnected from schools.

People say they are disconnected from schools and the school system. As a result, they are concerned that the schools aren’t really in touch with the issues out in the community that affect children and families.

“Show you care, you go the extra mile like staying afterwards, getting in touch with the families. Sometimes, parents won’t be involved if they work and may not be able to effectively work with that child. The teacher needs to stay after school to work more closely with the child or get them into an after-school activity to help that child succeed.”

— Florida Student



But at the same time, people have a lot of good things to say about teachers. Teachers are at the forefront of these participants’ minds when they think about what happens at school. A person from a community in the Mid-Atlantic said that “at the core of this issue, is that teachers need to be really, really valued.” Another person connected better teaching with school attendance: “If you have a good teacher you want to go to school maybe more.” In one conversation, a person expressed strong support. “How about some encouragement for our teachers? Our teachers bear the brunt. They get brought down.” One person sounded a similar theme: “It’s hard for a teacher to get up and go to work when she has to face 40 kids.”

People also recognize that teaching today is different from the way it used to be, and the capabilities have in many ways improved over the past few decades. A person in the Northeast said that teaching has “advanced from what we learned [when we were young]. The techniques have changed.”

This optimism and good will, however, does not seem to extend far beyond teachers, and many people we heard from expressed a sense of frustration with what they perceive to be going on in schools. In one conversation, a person bluntly

said that he believes people in the community, “Don’t feel welcomed.” They believe this affects their ability to trust schools as a whole.

However, people said there are other problems too. Many people said they thought teachers are held back from being as effective as they could be by the “bureaucracy” or the “system.” In the Southwest someone said, “[The] bureaucracy is overwhelming.” Another person from a different part of the country echoed this idea. “I’ve heard teachers complain about the bureaucracy. Sometimes it’s hard to innovate or do something different because it doesn’t fall within the whatever.”

But, many participants were more pointed about what they saw as problems when it comes to schools. “The problem starts at the top,” one person suggested. Acknowledging a perceived gap between school policymakers and what’s happening in the classrooms and the community, another person suggested that we need to “open lines of communication between the ones who make the policy and the ones who the policy affects.”

Another participant struck a similar note and asked, “At the very top, you know, we speak education, but are we putting in the necessary programs and necessary things—giving us the



# “I don’t feel welcomed.”

necessary amount of teachers ... in the classroom?” Added another person, “Management. It comes down to that. Who is managing the school?”

## A Lack of Fairness

People say they resent that there are aspects of public education that they see as unfair. Specifically, they say that people who live in the right place, or who have it easier economically, seem to have an unfair advantage over people who are struggling.

Participants are resentful that some schools and school districts do better than others. In the Midwest, a person said, “I don’t understand why one school has to be better than another.” A person in the South articulated a common complaint among many parents—that there are not enough textbooks. “Sharing books? How can kids succeed if they can’t bring books home? That is unacceptable.” One participant complained, “Nothing is equally distributed. It’s the haves and the have-nots.” On the West Coast, one person said, “The schools with the highest test scores are in East [part of town]. Why is that? Is it social economic conditions? Are the teachers better in East [part of town]? Why aren’t kids in East and West learning at the same pace?”

Another person in a different community said angrily, “Education should be the same for all kids. All kids should have the same opportunities. I think they are robbing from the poor [when schools in wealthy communities get more funding].” Data from the national poll suggest that these feelings are especially intense among people of color. Among minorities, concern over unequal funding between white versus minority schools and urban versus suburban or rural schools is high (7.4 and 8.4 average ratings on a scale of 0 to 10).

Another person gave voice to the dilemma that many others said they faced: “What I always hear is that there’s a difference in where the schools are. Some suburbs have much better education, and I know a lot of people live in the city until their kids are school age, and then they feel they have to move out to a suburb where they really don’t want to go unless they can afford the private schools, which I hear you need to enroll them when they’re born, and they’re very, very, very costly.”

Aside from being upset that not all schools and school districts do as well as one another, people also see it as unfair that the kids whose parents have the time and energy to be involved do better. Not everyone has time to be involved in school, they say. “Parents work so hard,” said one person we heard from. “The last thing they can do when they get home is focus on their child’s schoolwork for four hours.”

Another person from a different community said, “What happens to the children whose parents are not engaged in trying to get their children into an effective school?” A parent whose child is in a charter school complained, “The principal at our charter school tells parents if you don’t want to volunteer X number of hours and come to X number of meetings, if you can’t commit to this school maybe this is not the right school for you. We work really hard to keep our kids in that school.”

## Instilling values is just as important to people as teaching academics.

“There has got to be more responsibility,” is how one person we heard from summed up their frustration with children falling behind. “Kids are not working as hard today.” In another

community, a person said, “We have got to teach common decency.” Still another person from another community added, “We should be more responsible at home,” and asked: “Who teaches respect, morals and work ethic?” Said another individual, “I would like [students] to learn cause and effect—just because someone didn’t see you, does not mean you got away with it. I would like them to learn to care for one another.”

This focus on basic values is strongly felt and reflected in findings from the national poll, too. In the poll, 57 percent of respondents say that the “biggest hurdle to building strong communities ... has more to do with decline in our moral values,” instead of lack of jobs or health care. This is remarkable, as this poll comes while the recovery from the deepest recession in recent history is only beginning to be felt.

## Focus on Values and Community

People saw room for a renewed focus on values both in the home and in schools. In schools, they do not necessarily mean a specialized ethics program, but instead a more common-sense approach. They specifically want to see respect and personal responsibility focused on. One person identified the problem this way: “I work at a high school. I’ve been working for the school district for 20 years. And I notice that, from the time that I started working in the school district, I’ve seen disrespect for the teacher—there’s no respect. There is no respect.” Other participants talked about the same issue—a lack of respect for authority, for rules and for others. This is a pervasive concern. Indeed, in the national poll, the fourth highest overall concern held by respondents—7.5 on a scale of 0 to 10—is “Young people lacking respect for elders.”

In addition to a strongly expressed concern for values in the school, people also looked to the community and to home for a renewed emphasis on values. This came in the form of both a

# Lifting Up America’s Teachers

Although the findings in this report are clear that it will take the entire community to help our children succeed, community conversation participants shared the general view that more should be done to grow the ranks of effective teachers and to provide the support, resources and tools to teachers who need or may simply want more to be successful.

So what can be done to ensure that we better understand what makes an effective teacher, lift those teachers up and put policies and systems in place that help them succeed?

In 2009, United Way Worldwide received funds through the generous support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to support a strategic communications and advocacy initiative to build public support for bold reform around teacher effectiveness. In turn, United Way Worldwide provided sub-grants to 14 state and local United Ways in Florida, North Carolina and Tennessee. They reached deep into their communities to engage parents, teachers and students, business leaders and law enforcement and many other interested parties. Together, they dialogued about effective strategies to support and grow the number of great teachers in their classrooms and to create a pipeline to develop the critical talent that will be needed in the years to come.

Nearly 200 listening sessions took place with more than 1,200 individuals of all walks of life in rural, suburban and urban communities. Teachers and parents joined with students, local and state agencies, education foundations, education associations, school district leaders, university representatives, business leaders, faith-based and community non-profit leaders and even community members who have no direct connection to public schools to find answers.

They were asked to share their experiences and observations about what makes a teacher effective, what barriers prevent teachers from becoming successful and how—as a community—they might be able to address those barriers.

What they learned is that people are hungry for meaningful dialogue on the issue and that given the right forum people *will* come together, *will* rethink long-held beliefs and will embrace new ideas and strategies. Most importantly, they learned that people care deeply about and support their teachers and that many point to the following characteristics as distinguishing the great ones from those who may be struggling:

- **The most effective teachers set high expectations and emphasize rigorous academics.** Respondents of all kinds clearly believe that our most effective teachers are those who demand the most from their students. “My 10th grade English teacher was a blessing,” said one conversation participant. “She never let me turn in half-done work. She corrected my papers and made sure I used correct grammar. She helped me get a scholarship to attend college.” Another participant offered

the following observation: “[My teacher] always helped me out and didn’t take it easy on me as far as grades because she knew my potential ... She believed in my potential even when I didn’t.” Additionally, current students were just as likely to demand tough teachers as adults were to look back fondly upon them.

- **The most effective teachers connect instruction to the real world and a relevant future.** Business leaders in particular are in tune with what skills are needed for success in today’s competitive workforce. And they’re happy to dedicate time and resources if they believe their efforts will be met with positive results. Many, however, expressed concern about the workforce-preparedness of students emerging from public schools, specifically referencing the breakdown between the speed of change and the ability of public education to keep pace. Teachers who go the extra mile to provide students with concrete examples of the relevance of classroom experiences to the actual real world were deemed most effective. A seventh grade student captured this perspective by stating: “A harder teacher will make you have better grades, which will get you a better job and make you have a better life.”
- **The most effective teachers are subject matter experts who understand the material they are teaching.** Students, parents and community members noted time and time again the importance of subject matter expertise. Parents saw a direct connection between teachers who are strong on subject matter and their children’s future job success. One parent talked about the challenges her young daughter had and how she overcame them with the help of a dedicated teacher. “I remember when my daughter could not read,” she said. “Her teacher excelled at teaching kids to read. In a month she had her reading. Because of that one teacher’s work, a light switch was flipped. Today, my daughter is thriving in medical school.”
- **The most effective teachers maintain open lines of communication with students, parents, other teachers and the larger community.** Respondents clearly felt that teachers who took the time to communicate with students and their parents through home visits or telephone calls (and not just with “bad news”) were more effective. “I was able to call each teacher on the phone when there was a problem,” said one participant. “The staff was not just there to get a paycheck; they made sure [that] if there was a problem, they helped to resolve it.”

***United Ways participating in this project include:***

- United Way of Florida
- United Way of Broward County
- United Way of Northeast Florida
- United Way of Tampa Bay
- United Way of North Carolina
- United Way of Forsyth County
- United Way of Iredell County
- United Way of Lee County
- United Way of Rowan County
- United Way of Tennessee
- United Way of Greater Chattanooga
- United Way of Greater Knoxville
- United Way of Mid South/Memphis
- United Way of Metropolitan Nashville



complaint that values are eroding and as an admonishment that families and leaders in the community need to do better. Findings from the national poll suggest that this is a critical area of concern, too. For example, 86 percent of respondents agree (almost half, 48 percent, agree strongly) that “Our faith communities need to play a greater role in helping children succeed.”

In the Midwest, one person we heard from expressed concern that “babies are having babies,” and another in the same conversation pointed to “families on each block with some kids, [and] at least one not going to school.” On the West Coast, a student said, “I don’t have ... parents; I’m on my own page. That’s why I’m here [in this conversation].” One person from the South said, “Many of our kids don’t have positive role models.” And, in the Midwest, a person pointed out that “kids aren’t getting the love, trust and attention at home that they need to succeed.” A person from a rural community agreed with these sentiments and added, “It is a huge issue. We lose our children between the ages of 15 and 20.”

Along with such worries, people expressed a strong optimism that change is possible if parents and caregivers will focus on instilling responsibility in their own homes. “I’m going to say it all starts at home,” said a person from the Northeast. “If you don’t have that institution where your parents are either kicking your a\*\* like my mom did and you don’t have a good teacher, then you’re not going to really learn.”

Another participant in this conversation agreed. “It starts in the house and hits our schools.”

A young person in the Northwest suggested that “schools need to pay more attention to a kid’s home life, ‘cause if there is too much drama at home you can’t pay attention.” Another young person in the same conversation agreed saying, “My whole group of friends in middle school—our home issues affected school issues.”

## Academics and More

People recognize that fundamental academics are a critical part of a good education. One person said, “I want teachers to try to, even though the kids are young, try to stress how important it is to learn how to read and write.” A young participant in another conversation said, “They should teach what we need to be taught—the basics.” A person from yet another community said that education needs to be “solid preparation for future.” A person from the West Coast suggested that it is important to focus on the quality of these basics. “Schools should be looked at more closely as to how their students are doing,” said this person. “My daughter gets straight A’s, but when I sit down with her and do homework it is clear she is not an A student.”



# WAITING FOR “SUPERMAN” and United Way

To help bring more voices to the table and galvanize individuals and organizations to act on behalf of America’s children, United Way partnered with Participant Media on the national social action campaign for the award-winning documentary **WAITING FOR “SUPERMAN.”**

Because of the interest around the film, United Way saw an opportunity to extend its community conversation process around WAITING FOR “SUPERMAN” and bring people together to spark a vital discussion in communities across the country about the state of education. Utilizing a modified version of United Ways’ Education Community Conversation Guide, dozens of local United Ways hosted viewing parties and discussions focused on identifying ways to work together to create and maintain great schools.

Ultimately, 11 local United Ways agreed to serve as local campaign managers for Participant Media’s social action campaign. Specific local campaign goals included:

- Communicating with local school board members and superintendents about the importance of rewarding great teachers
- Pursuing governors and gubernatorial candidates for implementation of Common Core Standards
- Getting state and federal elected officials to support innovative school models with proven track records
- Recruiting individuals to volunteer to help young school-age children learn to read

*Following are some highlights from those efforts:*

### United Way for Southeastern Michigan (Detroit, MI)

As part of its effort to improve education, United Way for Southeastern Michigan is mobilizing the community to transform the region’s 30 dropout factories—high schools graduating fewer than 60 percent of their students—into high-performing schools that graduate more than 80 percent of students by 2018—or close them permanently.

Approximately 500 people participated in 58 community conversations hosted by United Way for Southeastern Michigan and their local partners. The purpose of these events was to move participants from discussion to action for improving education.

- Partners such as Detroit Parent Network, Black Family Development and the regional Michigan PTA leadership organized separate viewings of the film and community conversations with select audiences.
- Eleven of the community sessions were organized for students, including one that United Way hosted in partnership with America’s Promise Grad Nation initiative, an event that resulted in all 200 students that attended signing a pledge to graduate from high school.
- Through the collaboration, over 300,000 individuals received emails about the movie and social action campaign.
- United Way held a series of meetings with key policymakers, including Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm and House Education Chairman Tim Melton.

## United Way of Santa Fe County (Santa Fe, NM)

United Way of Santa Fe County hosted a local premiere and also utilized the film as a starting point for 20 community conversations, including one with the school board, to learn more about what the community thinks and feels about education. Additionally, with the recent DVD and Blu-ray release of the film, it has been possible to further expand the conversation on education and the challenges our children face by hosting screening parties in people's homes.

According to Allison Gregory, vice president of development for United Way of Santa Fe County, "Doing the premiere was the smartest decision we have made in a long time in terms of advancing our visibility and credibility, not only in the area of early education but in education transformation in Santa Fe."

United Way leadership met with the school superintendent and convened a powerful community conversation with the Santa Fe school board and the United Way Board of Directors to discuss teacher effectiveness issues. As a result of these efforts, new parent groups were created throughout the city and more than 30 high school volunteers now read to elementary school students. In addition to providing extensive coverage of the premiere, the local paper started a weekly education column to provide its readers with more detailed information on local education issues.

## United Way of Essex and West Hudson (Newark, NJ)

United Way of Essex and West Hudson is working to expand the focus of its Celebrity Read initiative, which brings local celebrities and volunteers into local classrooms to share their love of books and reading. The organization wants to expand the focus of the program by giving celebrity readers opportunities to act as literacy coaches and make a commitment to work regularly with struggling readers during the 2011-12 school year.

United Way of Essex and West Hudson hosted two screenings with panels that engaged a cross-section of leadership and stakeholders. Officials quickly engaged participants by placing staff members with iPads in the lobby to encourage them to log onto the WFS site and send letters to school leaders. In addition, a "Thank a Teacher" photo station was set up so participants could take a photo with a personal thank you message to their favorite teacher. These were then posted on the WFS City Facebook page and on the United Way site.

### Local United Ways that served as local campaign managers for the WAITING FOR "SUPERMAN" social action campaign include:

- United Way of Metropolitan Chicago (Chicago, IL)
- United Way for Southeastern Michigan (Detroit, MI)
- United Way of Greater Los Angeles (Los Angeles, CA)
- United Way of New York City (New York, NY)
- United Way of Essex and West Hudson (Newark, NJ)
- United Way of the Bay Area (San Francisco, CA)
- United Way of Santa Fe County (Santa Fe, NM)
- United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley (Boston, MA)
- United Way of the Columbia-Willamette (Portland, OR)
- Mile High United Way (Denver, CO)
- Valley of the Sun United Way (Phoenix, AZ)

For more on WAITING FOR "SUPERMAN" and Participant Media's social action campaign, visit their website at [www.waitingforsuperman.com/action](http://www.waitingforsuperman.com/action).

But, beyond academics, people were forceful in calling for more than just the "three R's." They feel the whole child needs to be focused on—physical, mental, emotional. A person from the Northeast said, "Offer these kids something other than just reading, writing and arithmetic. There's nothing wrong with that. You need that." In another community, a person asserted, "We need to look at child as whole person, not just as a student. It's too difficult to improve education outcomes when there are all these negative social conditions around the kids." A participant in another community complained, "My children get one day a week of P.E. One day."

Another participant in the same conversation felt that children are not given enough different opportunities to learn different things. "Give them a more well-rounded education, and let them know kind of what's out there as far as opportunities in different fields," she said, "and maybe what they want to gravitate toward whatever their strengths are. Because I want my school to have an arts program, and now that stuff is always taken away ... Just give them that opportunity." Overall, participants said they felt that there is too much focus on academics and "teaching to the test."

## We've reached a turning point in education.

People feel that we are lagging severely behind where we should be when it comes to education. "Public schools have to fundamentally change," said one person from a conversation in the South. Another person from a different community said, "Education is so important, our kids are falling so far behind, you've got to do something."

People describe being "disappointed" and "discouraged" with how education is going. "It doesn't seem to be doing too well," one person said. An individual from an urban community in



the Midwest gave the schools a “2 out of 10.” Yet another person said, “Education is lagging behind. Even within the same school districts, schools have tremendous disparities.”

An individual on the West Coast expressed a sense of resignation: “Year after year, you hear ... United States schools scored lowest in test scores around the world, again and again. So you kind of expect that, you know. You kind of expect the schools, each year, to go lower and lower—even though you hope they don’t.” In another West Coast conversation, one person pointed to urgency: “There are resources available, but some families drop through the cracks. 7,000 kids dropping out—something needs to be done.”

## Needed Change

These comments emphasize data from the national poll that reveal 50 percent of Americans in challenged areas feel that public schools are getting worse. And, almost 3 in 10 (29 percent) of national poll respondents from challenged areas said they were concerned about their child dropping out of school.

While there was a strong overall sentiment that things need to change when it comes to education, people also were able to go into greater detail about just where they see the problems. School crowding topped the list for many. “The biggest crime today,” said one man, “is that we don’t have enough schools. And the schools we do have are outdated and overcrowded. You take 30 kids in one classroom with one teacher, and you can say that is not a good learning environment.”

For others, the chief problem was lack of resources and materials. A person from the Northeast complained about outdated textbooks: “My daughter had a history class. They covered the Vietnam War. It wasn’t in [her textbook]. I couldn’t believe it. I was looking, and I wanted to see. [Her textbook] ended with the Cold War was coming on, but not Vietnam.”

However, no single aspect of education stood out as the biggest problem. Indeed, in the national poll, respondents placed “too many students who come to school unprepared to learn because of issues at home” at the top of their list of concerns about public schools.

# “Many of our kids don’t have role models”

## Anger and Optimism

When pressed to find something they felt was going well in education, many groups could not name anything significant. In one conversation a person said, “Supposedly the food got better. I don’t think you get that gunky macaroni anymore.” In a different conversation, someone said that a new experiment with school uniforms was among the only things going well. In other conversations, people pointed to the fact that teachers have, and respond to, e-mail. About her daughter, one person from an urban Midwest community said, “Her teacher communicates with us through e-mail. Because the teacher doesn’t always get the time in the morning or after school to talk to you, because she may have some place to go, just like you may have appointments after school.”

While these are important examples of progress, the overall sense of disappointment strongly overshadowed them.

When asked how they felt about how education was going overall, people said they felt “disappointed,” “sad” and “angry.” One person expressed a dim view of future prospects: “Whatever we have, we’re probably going to have less. So you ask how do we feel about it. It’s not been a good feeling.”

A few people said they were “optimistic,” but qualified it by saying they still felt cautious. One person lamented, “I have a 19-year-old son. He is a high school graduate. He is looking for work, and he can’t fill out job applications. He doesn’t know how to fill out applications.” Another person said, “Schools are not looking like what they used to be. It’s not looking too good.” It’s so bad, they say, many have reluctantly opted out. “I gave up on the ... school district,” said one person.

## People want to work together on this but aren’t sure what to do.

People said that the most effective thing that could be done to improve education in communities is for more people to step forward and participate in community life. By this they mean volunteering at schools or even volunteering in more general community activities. In many conversations, this kind of participation was singled out as the sole action that could improve things.

In some conversations, the moderator pushed back on this assertion and asked participants whether they were really saying that the best way to improve education, beyond policy changes, curriculum improvements and funding shifts, would be for individuals in communities to volunteer and participate. “Yes,” came the response.

## Involved 100 Percent

While in general people said they believe all community members should step forward, they were particularly insistent that parents need to participate in concrete ways. The national poll reinforced these feelings. In the poll, “lack of



parental involvement” is the top concern when it comes to public school issues (average of 7.4 on a scale of 0 to 10). One person on the West Coast said, “If [my child] misses the bus, or forgot to get on the bus, or forgot his lunch or whatever, these things happen. It’s not the school’s problem. I can leave my job and help him. Parents need to step in and help.”

This individual continued, “The school shouldn’t be responsible for everything. As parents, school is a community. Each year we meet some other parents, and we exchange phone numbers with other parents. If I can’t make it to pick up my son then I have another number/resource to call. Parents need these connections. Parent-to-parent contact makes it successful.”

“If your child is going to the school then you need to be involved 100 percent,” said one person in a Midwestern conversation. Another from a rural community added, “If we’re so concerned about it, we need to step in.”

People gave testimony to the strong positive effect of parental participation. A person from the Northeast, for example, described his own volunteer efforts: “One person can teach the other, and that’s what they ought to do. I volunteered to coach baseball in school. I have my regular job, but four days out of the week I’m putting myself out there. A lot of the kids, they tell me, ‘I wish my parent would come more. I wish my dad would teach me.’”

People see involvement in schools as crucial, and eroding. “People adopt freeways all day long,” said one person. “How about adopting a school?” In another community, a person said, “Education is a complete system. Parents have to take more ownership of it.” Still another person, this one from a smaller community, said, “Parents just don’t want to be involved anymore. The teacher’s job is to teach, but the parents have to be involved.”

A person in one Midwestern conversation challenged others: “As a parent, what are you doing to make sure your kids get an education?”

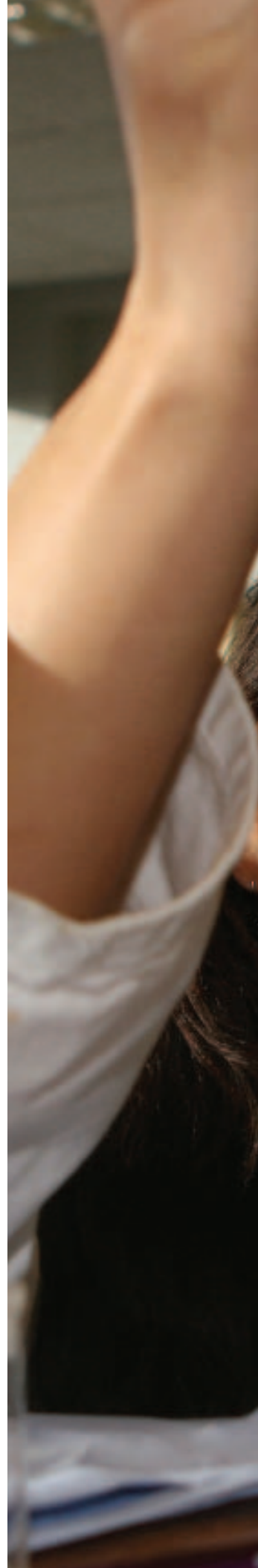
## Pitching In Together

“[The] solution needs to be grassroots, The communities have to decide to become involved again,” said one individual. “It takes a village to raise a child. I grew up in a small town, and the entire community knew you and was aware of what you were doing. This was especially good for teenagers even though they didn’t like it. Now we are no longer connected. How many of us know our neighbors?” Another person added, “Schools do need money, but more importantly they need the time of volunteers to serve as role models.”

Community involvement is so important that people in two separate conversations even suggested making it mandatory. “Like jury duty,” one person said. “Maybe once every six years you have to spend a week in a school. And usually when you’re an adult, you have some experience. You’re a good reader or you’re good in math ... For one week the school next to you, if you’re good at math, hooks you up with the math department. Sit and work with them.”

Volunteering at school is not the only way that people can help young people. People are willing to be coaches, mentors and tutors in many community-based settings as well. According to the national poll, the top activities that people say they are willing to do are:

- Work with a church to provide youth activities (25 percent)
- Neighborhood watch (22 percent)
- Mentor children in after school programs (21 percent)
- Help with homework or tutoring (15 percent)







**“We can all do more than we realize. Give us some ownership. Give us some accountability and a sense of purpose and pride, and we can do a lot more than we realize.”**

More than half (51 percent) said they had volunteered in the last 12 months.

A person from a rural community made a strong case for the power of individual participation:

“People are capable of so much more than they realize. When they’re motivated and they feel a sense of ownership, they can do so much more. We can all do more than we realize. Give us some ownership. Give us some accountability and a sense of purpose and pride, and we can do a lot more than we realize.”

And in a different, very urban community, a person described how such an attitude can begin to have ripple effects from community to community:

“I would hope that these communities are sharing with the communities that aren’t as successful in their strategy. ‘What are we doing that’s working?’ You know, and learning from one another. So it’s not just the kids learning in school, but then the communities learning from the other communities.”

# IMPLICATIONS: MOVING FORWARD

What do we make of what we heard? While these conversations weren't designed to assess policy prescriptions or specific education strategies, they do create a "lens" for people to use when thinking about the work they might pursue relative to education.

*Here are just a few potential implications:*

**The time is right for education mobilization; the intrinsic link between education and community issues makes this a ripe issue for many different kinds of organizations to work on.**

People feel that there is something wrong and that it is time to take action. Those who seek to move the ball forward on education are coming at it in an environment where they can expect support from people who believe it's time to act.

What's more, this link between community and education means that the issue can transcend barriers to action. While it is natural for parents of school age children to feel a vested interest, we have found that people from all walks of life can see the importance of stepping forward and working together on education.

*Things to keep in mind to mobilize more individuals in support of education:*

- People see education as a critical part of the American dream
- People see a direct connection between how education is going and how their community is going
- Most people agree this is something that we urgently need to address
- People are ready to do something and see the value of individual contributions

The basic ingredients for broad-scale mobilization are in place for organizations and leaders that

can create a compelling message around the education challenge.

**Ask yourself:**

- 1) How can you more deliberately tap into people's belief that now is the time to do something about education?
- 2) What can you do to expand your engagement beyond parents of school-age children and the "usual suspects?"
- 3) What can you do to help students in out-of-school settings?
- 4) How might you leverage people's belief that something needs to be done to bring diverse stakeholders to the table to work together on solutions?

**Schools and school leaders have a tremendous opportunity to reconnect to their communities and build trust at a time when people are hungry for it—and want to be on the schools' side.**

While people feel disconnected from public schools in many ways, they are hungry for a renewed sense of involvement in community. For organizations that want to work deliberately to bring communities and schools together in a deeper way, the chance to make real progress exists.

Even though many people feel a sense of disconnect when they think about their local school, at the same time they have a strong desire to trust more deeply. In order for schools to best reach out to community members, they should try to meet the community on its own terms. Work with community members to learn their priorities for their neighborhoods and blocks and see how to address those together.

Although school leaders often talk about making efforts to reach out only to find a lukewarm response, some community members say they don't feel welcomed at school. For school leaders, this represents a tremendous opportunity to find new ways to bring residents into schools to work together as partners in helping our children succeed. For other organizations working on education issues, it means there is a role to play in facilitating a bridge between the institutions of schools and the communities they are clearly a part of.

And, for individuals, it may mean setting preconceived notions behind, taking a step forward and reaching out a hand to local schools.

### ***Things to keep in mind to help reconnect schools and the community:***

- Consider holding meetings with community members where you honestly listen and try to understand their aspirations for their community. Frame these discussions around aspirations, not, "What can we do for you?" Change the dynamic of the conversation from one of customer service to one of partnership ("What can we do together?")
- Remember that, often, people are not sure they trust education leaders to act in ways that connect with community needs, whether that lack of trust is warranted or not. Try to avoid the reflex to overpromise
- Consider supporting initiatives and efforts that would mobilize individuals into actions that take place in and around the school where residents and school leaders are brought together to co-design the work
- Partner with trusted community organizations and institutions in these efforts—from faith communities to service providers—to build both trust and capacity to meet students' needs

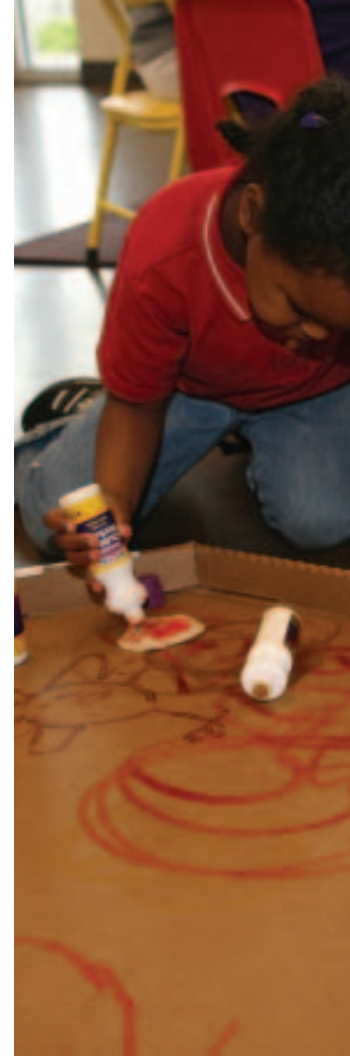
### ***Ask yourself:***

- 1) What can we do to connect the needs of schools with the aspirations of community members and vice versa?
- 2) What concrete steps can we take to help school leaders understand the aspirations of individuals and for individuals to better understand the aspirations and challenges school leaders face?
- 3) How can schools, families and communities be partners in supporting student success?

## **Programs and strategies for helping children succeed must be aligned to the total needs of the child—academic, physical, social, emotional and others.**

People point to social and developmental issues as much as, or even more, than they focus on academic fundamentals. Initiatives that tap into this deep-seeded sense that the "whole child" must be helped will go farther. These kinds of efforts will much more deeply resonate with people's concern that we aren't doing enough to create the kinds of productive, responsible individuals needed to sustain civil society.

When people talk about what kids really need these days, they gravitate toward things that have to do with character and responsibility. People especially want young people to develop a sense of healthy sense of respect for others.





People and groups seeking to foster community progress in education might keep that in mind and offer people ways to be role models at the same time that they are providing needed volunteer support. For instance, reading tutors can not only help children master reading but can also play a role in inspiring them to develop into the best person they can be.

***Ways to support efforts aligned to the total needs of a child:***

- Connect to the skills and talents people already have. For instance, people will likely feel more comfortable about reading a book to a child than they will about helping a child learn grammar
- Offer non-academic help, from coaching to recreation and arts activities that enable adults who don't feel confident about their own academic skills to contribute to student success
- Offer diverse values and character building opportunities—in and out-of-school settings

***Ask yourself:***

- 1) How can our programs and initiatives include helping children develop skills and values?
- 2) How can we work with partners to address children's academic and non-academic needs?
- 3) How can we begin or continue an inclusive conversation throughout our community about how to share positive values with children?

- Frame volunteer opportunities in ways that resonate with people's aspirations

**Everyday individuals believe fixing education is a complex issue that doesn't have a "silver bullet" solution.**

Throughout the community conversations, focus groups and in the national poll, people tend to see shades of gray where some organizations see black and white when it comes to education. For example, people expressed frustration about sometimes feeling shut out of schools but were often quick to praise the hard work of teachers and feel that teachers are undervalued. People suggest that even the best schools cannot succeed if the youngest children do not enter ready for school.

They recognize the need to improve standards and feel the education challenge is reaching a critical point. In fact, they suggest that education is the cornerstone of our ability to succeed as a nation. At the same time, they lament the fact that in the race to be number one academically, we seem to be missing the mark when it comes

to building the kind of character necessary to have a vibrant community life.

At a time when there is a great deal of finger-pointing and scapegoating in the national education discourse we so often see reported on by the media, people in these conversations kept coming back to the notion that people were in part responsible for this problem and absolutely must be part of any real solution.

There is a clear message in these findings that any solution that looks or feels overly simplistic will not pass muster with a public that sees a much more complex, interconnected set of challenges and variables.

***Things to keep in mind if you are addressing educational issues:***

- Communicate about a single education improvement strategy as one of many needed strategies rather than the sole thing that will fix education
- Focus on student success, rather than on the success of schools and other institutions. This focus enables school and other organization leaders to find common ground with parents and community members
- Create, enhance and support community-wide programs, services and resources that encourage engaged learning and consistent connections with caring adults both in-school and out-of-school settings

***Ask yourself:***

- 1) Do our programs, initiatives and policies support education efforts in our community? If not, how can more effectively position them?
- 2) Are our strategic approaches aligned with people's aspirations in our community, and do they address diverse, rather than "one size fits all" solutions?
- 3) How can we leverage people's complex attitudes toward education as a way to bring more stakeholders to the table?





**People are looking for organizations that can help create clear pathways for people to act that are tied to large-scale change.**

People are eager to work together to improve things in their community. There is a deep reservoir of interest in organizations and initiatives that can connect people to one another and to actions that can have a direct bearing on the local quality of life.

When people think about what they can do to help education, they think about ways they can work together. They want to take actions that will improve community so education will improve.

Organizations trying to develop initiatives in this area should remember that people want to work together and not be treated as separate customers. It is important to develop ways for people to be with and work with one another. They are eager for opportunities to take action that are part of lasting change efforts not just “one-offs.”

***Things to keep in mind to move ahead on this issue:***

- Bring people together early to help focus on community aspirations when planning new initiatives or policies, including those the initiatives or policies seek to assist

- Work with partners to plan initiatives based on real outcomes for populations affected by a challenge, with strategies that get at the underlying issues so that volunteer efforts are part of something that will make a big difference
- Evaluate your efforts, including metrics that go beyond just counting numbers. Track stories of people working together to provide beacons to others who may follow. Help people see the change they are part of

***Ask yourself:***

- 1) How can we create opportunities for individuals to act that are part of larger change initiatives?
- 2) If we currently support volunteer opportunities, what additional strategies are needed to reach community-level outcomes so that volunteers are contributing to large-scale impact?
- 3) Are we connecting the dots for individuals so they can see where their efforts fit into to larger change? If not, how could we do a better job?

# AFTERWORD

**RICHARD C. HARWOOD, PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER,  
THE HARWOOD INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC INNOVATION**

*That Americans believe the nation has reached a crisis point in education is not news. What they want to do about it is. As I read through these findings, what becomes clear is that people not only want to address concerns about education, but they believe it is only through actions they and others take in local communities that the nation and our children have a fighting chance to succeed. If ever there was an issue on which Americans can mobilize for change—on which they yearn to engage—education is it.*

*Now is the time.*

*But nothing is automatic. We know this. While many people have fought hard to bring about positive change on education, for far too long others of us have chosen to retreat from the public square and hunker down. Too many of us have become bystanders, spectators, even mere “customers” of public schools. It’s time to re-engage.*

*The nation finds itself at a turning point. A different path is required.*





*But it's not mere bake sales at local schools people want to be involved in. Nor are they waiting for so-called "school experts" or a hero to solve this problem so it will go away. They don't believe there are quick fixes or silver bullets.*

*There is work to be done. People say we must find better ways to connect schools and communities. They want to return to something we know but all too often seem to forget: While academic standards are critical, so too is the need to develop the whole child. They argue that responsibility for action goes beyond just schools—that they, their neighbors, and the larger community must play a decisive role.*

*Indeed, the people involved in these conversations tell us that progress on education will require addressing the underlying conditions within communities. One without the other is not enough. They say people must revive a basic connection to one another in order to act together—that we must be brave enough to ask each other to step forward and become part of something larger than ourselves. There is a hunger, I believe, to do more than "fix" education: It is to restore a sense of belief in ourselves, and in one another, that we can take effective action together.*

*What is so compelling about these voices and the path they call us to take is that they come at a time when so much of our public discourse is so acrimonious and divisive. When it seems the nation is polarized—when gridlock and stalemates block progress. But on education, there is an opening. On this issue, at this time, people want to go in a different direction.*

*None of this will be easy. We must be aware of the deep mistrust that exists between many Americans and public schools, and that it is only through dedicated, long-term action that it can be restored. Despite people's desire for change, there is no apparent consensus on which individual policy prescriptions might be best to embrace. We must remind ourselves to stay at the table—each of us—as public discussions turn difficult because they will. And we must not lose sight of people's desire to believe again in their ability to act together, and so we must shine a bright light on the small steps taken to rebuild confidence.*

*To move ahead then will demand a renewed mindset of innovation because the truth is that so many communities, so many of our own lives, have undergone immense change in recent times. What worked yesterday may not be relevant in the days ahead. More of the same plodding and planning will produce the same predictable results. Our task is to find new ways to marshal our individual and collective talents and resources and put them to good use.*

*The message from the voices of these Americans is clear.*

*On concerns about education, there is an opening, and people are ready to take a new path. But nothing is automatic. Now, we must turn outward toward one another to do the work—together.*

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Richard Kohn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

# APPENDIX

## Time for a Broader Accountability: National Poll Findings

United Way Worldwide commissioned a national poll as part of our outreach efforts to dig deeper and add more texture to the community conversations hosted by local United Ways hosted around the country. The poll was conducted by brilliant corners Research and Strategies, a Washington, DC-based research and polling firm led by Cornell Belcher.

The poll, conducted in late January 2011, took place over six nights of calling. The national sample consisted of 1,000 phone call respondents in areas particularly challenged from the standpoint of high school graduation rates after controlling for poverty. There were an additional 200 interviews made in challenged districts in exclusively rural areas. The poll also included 600 control interviews nationally of all areas, regardless of graduation or poverty rates. (Unless otherwise noted, results reported are from the main sample of 1,000 from challenged areas.)

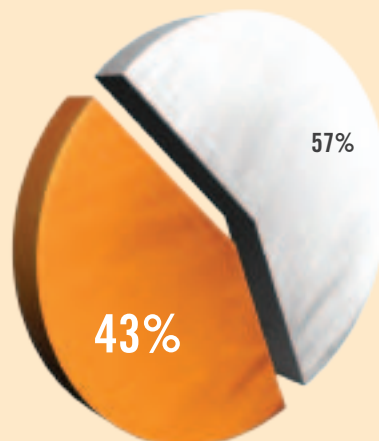
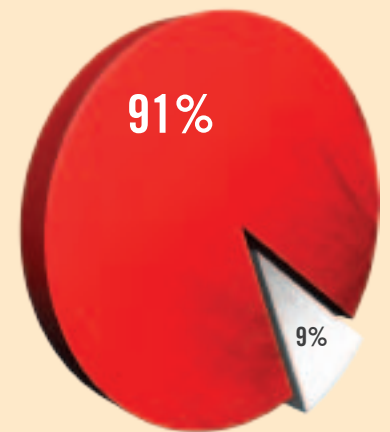
### Key Poll Highlights

Americans are very concerned about the state of children in the country today. And while education and schools are a central focus, their anxiety about young people expands beyond the classroom. Broadly, they feel our children are losing and in order to fix that the community must take greater responsibility for what's happening with the children. They don't absolve parents of primary responsibility in this challenge, nor do they let the broader community off the hook. Indeed, many are looking for viable vehicles that they can get involved with in order to help young people. Now is clearly an opportune time for

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**91% say “we as a community have to take greater responsibility for what’s happening with our children”**

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**A strong plurality, 43%, say they are most likely to get involved in community through church**

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**Top activities willing to do:**  
**Work w/church to provide youth activities (25%);**  
**Neighborhood watch (22%);**  
**Mentor children in after-school programs (21%);**  
**helping with homework or tutoring (15%)**

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a national call to volunteerism around saving our children.

In fact, Americans have a strong desire to see our children have better role models and understand that as a community we must spend more time volunteering. They are also strongly compelled by an understanding that the job market is changing, and unless we do a better job of preparing our young people, we simply will not be able to compete for the future.

There is a real urgency here as almost a third of parents in challenged areas are concerned about their children dropping out of school, particularly

African-American (36 percent) and Hispanic (56 percent) parents. But, Americans aren't pointing the finger simply at the schools in this fight for the children. The need for greater parental involvement and the problem of too many children coming to school unprepared to learn because of outside issues rank first and second on a broad list of problems with public schools.

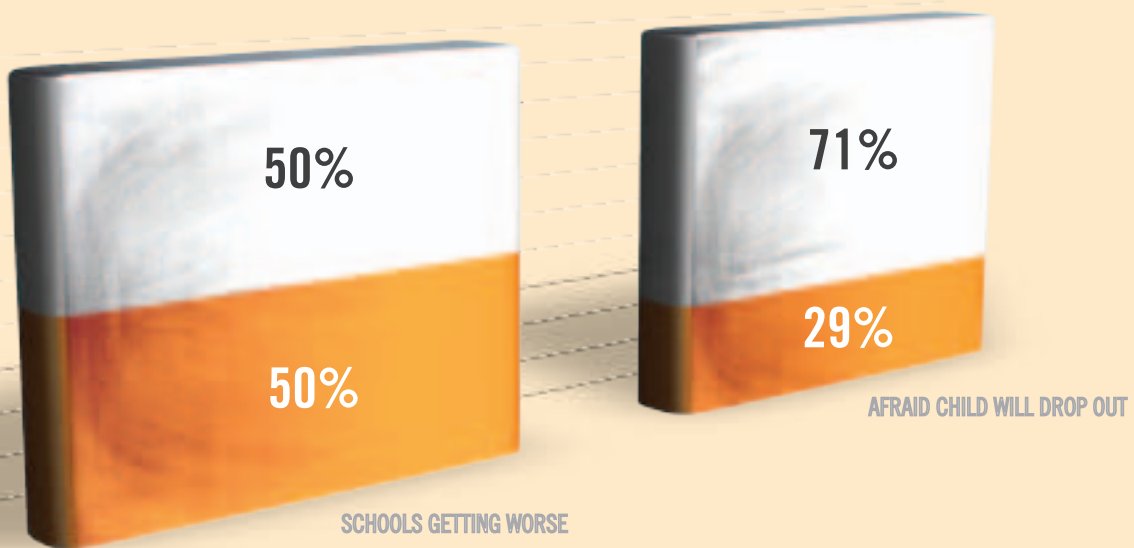
Americans see the need to take on more responsibility and engage in the fight for the future of the children. What they need is help getting involved. If they understand how they can play a productive role in solving the problem facing children, many new volunteers will come.

### **Ready to Work Together in Concrete Ways**

People said they were willing to help out at an organization or cause dedicated to helping young people succeed (6.4 willing on a scale of 0 to 10). And, people were clear that they prefer volunteer opportunities that are concrete and have an understandable connection to the needs of children.

The top four activities that Americans said they would be willing to do are:

- Work with a church to provide youth activities (25 percent)
- Neighborhood watch (22 percent)



- Mentor children in after school programs (21 percent)
- Help with homework or tutoring (15 percent)

When thinking about through which group they would be most likely to get involved in community, people overwhelmingly said their church or religious organization. Forty-three percent said this was the most likely avenue for them to get involved. The second most likely, a school in the community, was mentioned by 23 percent.

When it comes to whom respondents trust to give them information about getting involved in the community, respondents place teachers and education professionals and their religious leaders (32 percent each) at the top of the list, far ahead of other sources of information. Latinos placed teachers and education professionals at the top of the list of those they trust.

### Accountability, Responsibility and a Fight

People say they believe accountability for a good education is shared by communities

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**50% say public schools are getting worse**

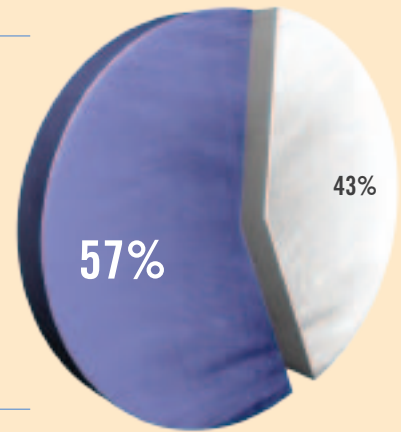
**29% say they are concerned that their child will drop out**

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**57% say the “biggest hurdle to building strong communities ... have more to do with decline in our moral values.” This even in the midst of an economic downturn**

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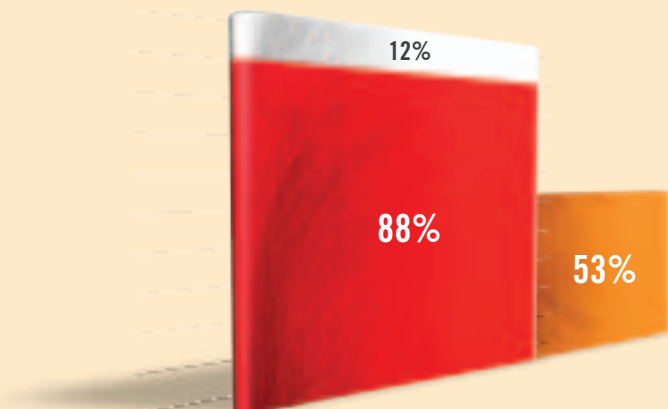
as well as schools, that communities must take greater responsibility for what is happening in education, and that the only way change will happen is if we fight for it.

They say that these arguments are the most compelling about why it's important to get involved in what's happening with children in our communities:

“Accountability doesn't start or stop at the doorsteps of our schools. To better prepare our children, yes parents have to step up ... [but] parents alone can't take on the political and educational system. The entire community must also be held accountable and join the fight for change.”

“We as a community have to take greater responsibility for what's happening with our children. We can no longer afford to pretend that these children are someone else's children ... We can no longer look the other way, it's time we take greater responsibility for what's happening with our young people.”

“Our children are losing and the only way we change that is if we are willing to fight for them. But their future demands that we as a community stand up and get involved. We must demand that all public schools prepare our children as well as the best public schools and that our streets are as safe as any others in order to ensure our children have the best opportunities for the future.”

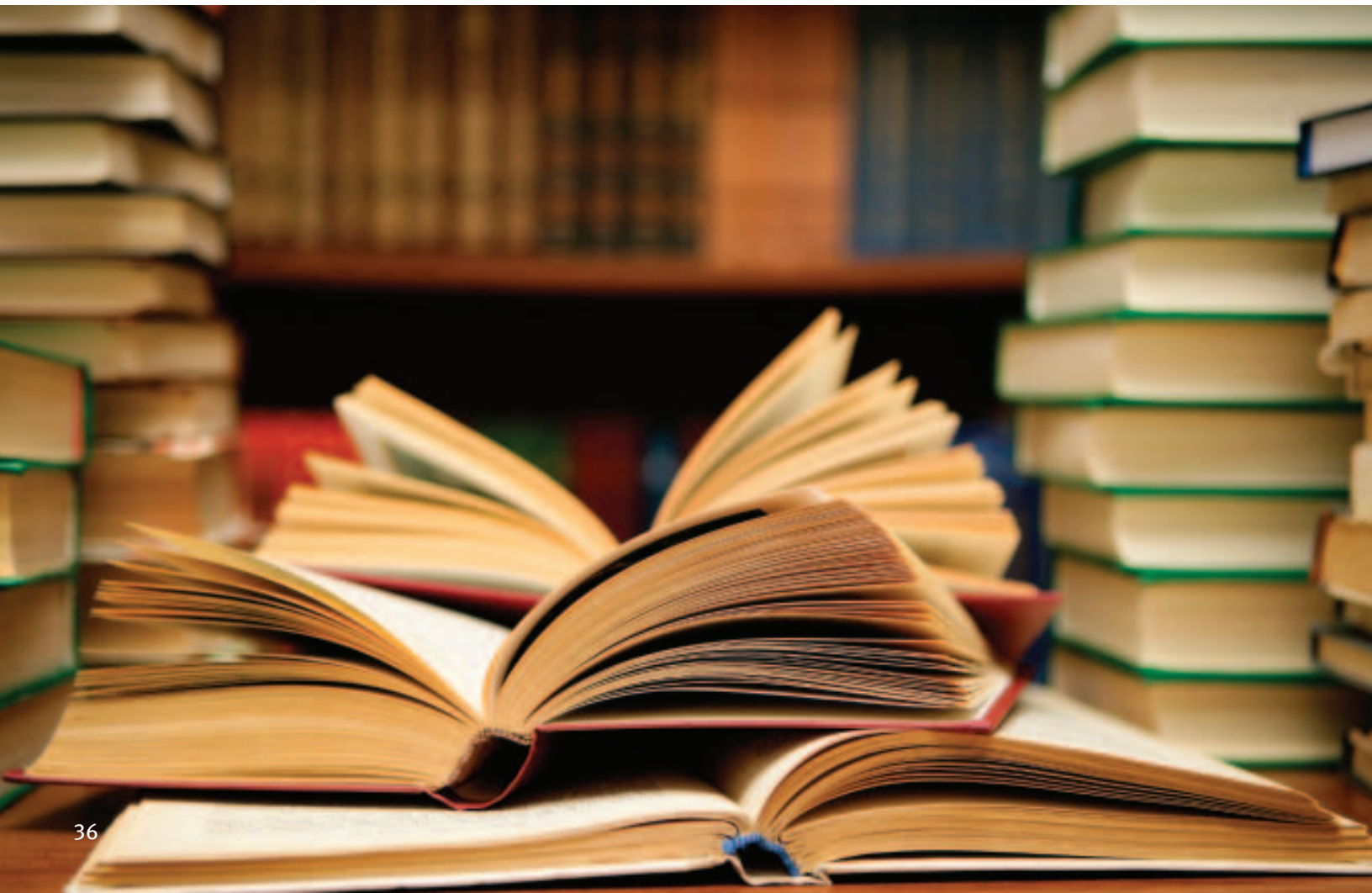


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**88% agree “good public schools are the foundation of the American dream” (53% strongly agree)**

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# Acknowledgements

## About United Way Worldwide

[www.liveunited.org](http://www.liveunited.org)

United Way Worldwide is the leadership and support organization for the network of nearly 1,800 community-based United Ways in 40 countries and territories. We advance the common good, creating opportunities for a better life for all, by focusing on education, income and health. The United Way movement mobilizes millions to action—to give, advocate and volunteer—to improve the conditions in which they live.

## Local United Way Support

The following United Ways contributed conversation notes to support the writing of this report:

- United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County (Asheville, NC)
- United Way for Southeastern Michigan (Detroit, MI)
- Greater Twin Cities United Way (Minneapolis, MN)
- United Way of San Diego County (San Diego, CA)
- Mile High United Way (Denver, CO)
- United Way of Acadiana (Lafayette, LA)
- United Way of Central Ohio (Columbus, OH)
- United Way of Metropolitan Tarrant County (Fort Worth, TX)
- United Way of Metropolitan Dallas (Dallas, TX)
- United Way of the Inland Valleys (Riverside, CA)
- United Way of Greater Cincinnati (Cincinnati, OH)
- United Way of Greater Toledo (Toledo, OH)
- Spokane County United Way (Spokane, WA)
- United Way of Lancaster County (Lancaster, PA)
- United Way of Northeast Florida (Jacksonville, FL)
- United Way of Santa Fe County (Santa Fe, NM)

## Writing, Editing and Project Management

Mike Wood, United Way Worldwide

## *Community Conversation Guide Development and Local United Way Training:*

### **The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation**

The Harwood Institute, founded and led by Richard C. Harwood, works with individuals, organizations and communities to turn outward and engage in community in a different way to develop their ability to make more intentional choices and judgments that lead to impact. The Institute is one of United Way Worldwide's signature partners for the Campaign for the Common Good and is working to accelerate the efforts of United Ways to build deeper relationships in communities and create lasting changes in education, income and health.

## *National Poll:*

### **brilliant corners Research and Strategies**

brilliant corners is a Washington, DC-based research and polling firm led by Cornell Belcher. Belcher, a CNN political contributor, is known as one of the premier strategists in national politics, as well as an increasingly powerful new voice in the rebranding of corporate America.

## *Focus Groups and Writing:*

### **Mannakee Circle Group**

The Mannakee Circle Group, founded by Brad Rourke, helps organizations engage better with the public. Rourke is a nonprofit leader, a sought-after speaker, a prolific writer, a technology early adopter and has been blogging since before the word was invented. The Mannakee Circle Group thrives on taking part in projects that can transform a community with a goal of showing people who lead community and other public-facing organizations how they can do a better job.

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