

**VOICES FOR THE
COMMON GOOD
SAN DIEGO
SPEAKS OUT ON
EDUCATION**



United Way
of San Diego County

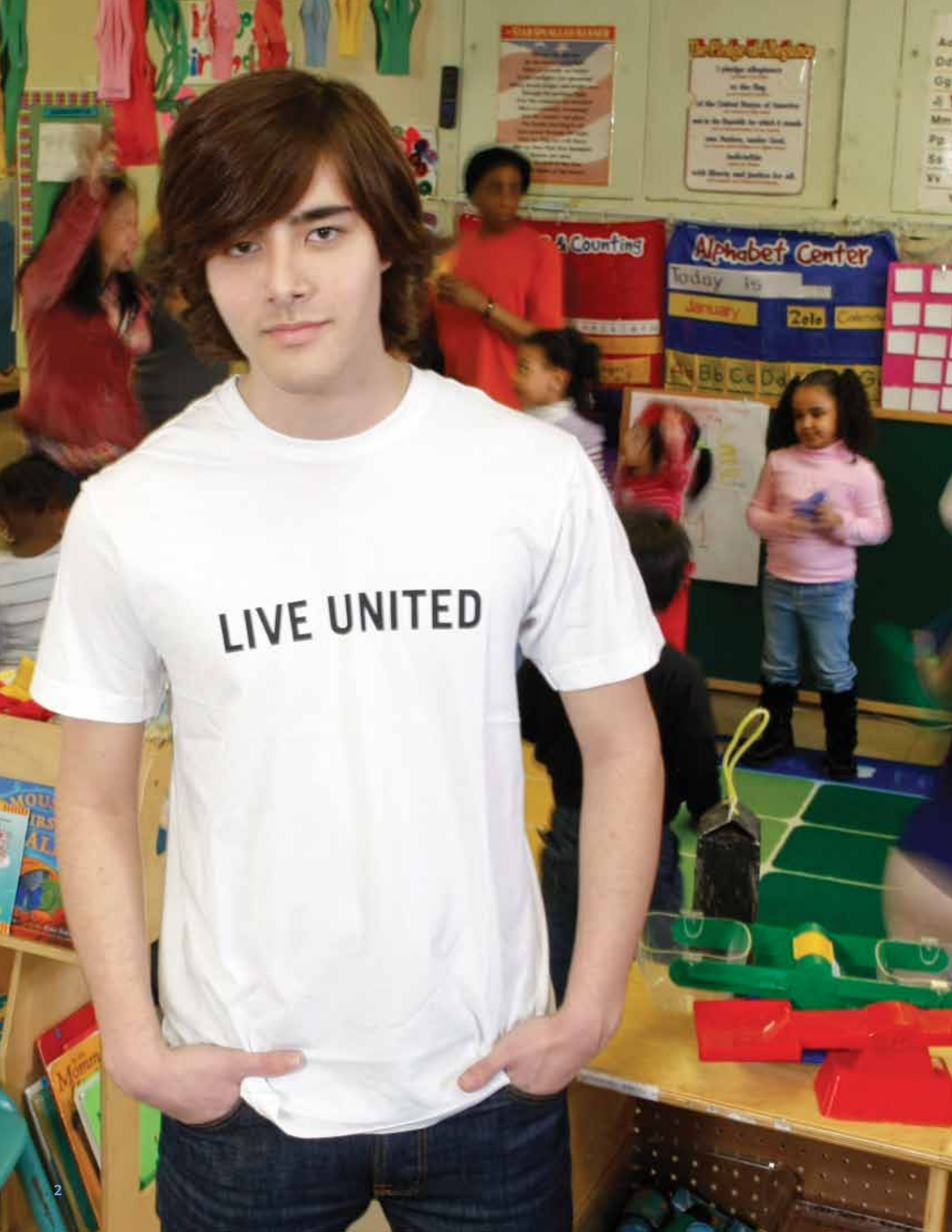


TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2-6
INTRODUCTION	7
ABOUT THIS REPORT	8
WHAT WE'VE LEARNED	9-19
SUPPORTING TEACHERS AND THE "WHOLE CHILD"	20-22
"WAITING FOR SUPERMAN" AND UNITED WAY	23
IMPLICATIONS: MOVING FORWARD	24-30
AFTERWORD	31
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	32



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- WHEN YOU IMPROVE SCHOOLS, YOU IMPROVE COMMUNITIES — AND VICE VERSA
- INSTILLING VALUES IS JUST AS IMPORTANT TO PEOPLE AS TEACHING ACADEMICS
- PEOPLE FEEL DISCONNECTED FROM SCHOOLS
- WE’VE REACHED A TURNING POINT IN EDUCATION
- EDUCATION FOR IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IS A CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC CHALLENGE

“We need to teach our kids to change the world.”

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. The 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 across the country. What we heard formed the basis of a national report “Voices for the Common Good: America Speaks Out on Education.” The voices of many San Diegans were included in that national report. In addition, United Way Worldwide commissioned six focus groups and a national poll to add texture to the conversations.

In San Diego, we talked to 15 groups of people in communities from Chula Vista to Oceanside and from El Cajon to Hillcrest. We asked everyday people — educators, parents, students and business leaders — specifically what they thought about education.

Here’s what we heard, loud and clear:

People across all demographic lines, from all walks of life, believe we are failing our children. They see education as the key to success; they believe that the only way children will be successful is if the entire community wraps its arms around them. Many talked about the needs of the “whole child” whose world outside school can dramatically impact success in the classroom.

People believe that good schools and good communities go hand-in-hand.

San Diegans see good schools and good communities as inextricably linked. When people lack jobs that provide a stable, living wage, it affects their ability to participate fully in children’s education and the community’s ability to maintain great schools. Many mentioned community as a place with a sense of family, where people know each other and look out for one another’s children. Some used the words “community connectedness” to describe their ideal picture.

FOUNDATION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

People feel disconnected from schools.

Some area residents said they couldn't trust schools to really understand what is happening in the community and the challenges their children face. "Parents are unwelcome and not heard." Several people said they did not think educators understood the economic pressures at home and the many reasons why parents have trouble being engaged.

However, others said teachers *do* make the effort to engage parents, but many parents don't seem to understand their importance in the process and don't show up to parent-teacher conferences. The majority of participants had positive things to say about the impact of great teachers, and about how hard teachers work.

Members of the refugee and immigrant communities said they confront special challenges. This was echoed by educators, nonprofit service providers and others alike. Language and culture were both a challenge and an opportunity, thought some participants. As English Language Learners, their children sometimes had difficulty following lessons, but they also said being bilingual was valuable in the global economy.

They felt it was important to connect parents and family members from these groups to the larger community so that both groups could benefit.

Members of the military community provided their unique perspective, saying they see the national picture first-hand. "As you move around, education isn't consistent. School requirements are different from state to state. There is fluctuation in quality and consistency." This group also described their challenges staying engaged and connected to schools — and even neighbors — when they are constantly being relocated.

Kids need role models as much as academic support.

Many participants talked about when they were children and the role models they had in their own lives. They felt kids today really needed this type of support when so many families had two working parents who could not always be involved. They told us that we can't solely focus on academics at the expense of nurturing the whole child. We need a stronger partnership with businesses and others in the community to create internships and more opportunities for children to see the relevance of education to their futures.

We're at a turning point in education.

Overall, San Diegans felt that many kids don't have what it takes to succeed, but that the path forward is unclear. Some commented on the need for more "real world" education, saying "schools are behind the times" and not relevant to today's youth. One Central San Diego participant described the current education system as "survival of the fittest." Another San Diegan lamented that "any kids with special needs or issues, like LGBT kids, don't do well with this system." Several pointed out that the world in which kids are growing up today doesn't match the current system. "We're betwixt and between right now. The old model of the one-room schoolhouse vs. the new model, which is not funded," was how one summed it up.

Schools can't do it alone — the whole community must be involved.

With few exceptions, people who participated in these conversations felt it was unrealistic to expect teachers and schools to do it all. People are calling on one another to step up and get involved. "As a parent, what are you doing to make sure your kids get an education?" Another said, "We dump on educators and don't take community responsibility for making youth successful." A third person said, "The schoolhouse can't teach

them everything; we have to be willing to teach them in the neighborhood."

Implications: Moving forward

Across demographic, economic and neighborhood lines, San Diegans were united in their view that we all need to be part of the solution. Many said changes were needed at the state, local, community and individual level. There was a strong sense that if parents stepped up, if schools connected to community and the community responded, that conditions would change for the better. There was a call for more role models for children — for adults who could act as "second shift" adults to tutor, mentor or otherwise support children. Many wanted successful pilot programs to be scaled up and for progress to be celebrated.

The business community was asked to give parents flexibility to be engaged in schools and to offer more real-world experiences for students. Solutions that focused on the whole child — academic, physical, social-emotional and other aspects — were said to have better odds of success. Ultimately, participants felt that the entire community had a role to play in improving education in the county and ensuring children's futures.

"Learning never exhausts the mind."

—Leonardo da Vinci



“I want to feel okay with my neighbors and community. I want to know that the kids down the street are being fed and learning. If the school’s on fire, I want the little old lady and the gang banger to be running with hoses, saying, ‘That’s my school!’ ”

INTRODUCTION

“When you know better, you do better.”

—Maya Angelou

In 2008, United Way Worldwide 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.

United Way of San Diego County listened to people across the county in the fall of 2010 to hear what everyday people had to say about education. From Chula Vista to Oceanside, from Hillcrest to El Cajon, we listened to groups of people talk about their hopes and dreams for children in our community. This report offers a gathering of those diverse voices on the challenges facing our children, our schools and our communities.

We heard ideas on how to transform our education system by involving the whole community to make sure our children achieve success.

And that’s just the beginning of what we heard. We heard that the people in San Diego realize our education system needs change, but they know it’s not an easy fix. And they agree that we can’t place the entire burden on schools. We need to take a more holistic approach.

Over and over again, we heard that people from every corner of the county care about education and see its impact on their community, and they are ready to work together to improve both. Organizations and leaders, neighbors and friends, parents and teachers, aunts and uncles — we must all be part of that change.

We also heard that we can’t stop there. Because educating our children can’t be accomplished without helping to create healthy kids and secure families.

These community conversations tell a story based on the real words that people used to talk about their aspirations both for their community and for education. We asked them how we might make it better, and they told us.

Now that we *know* better, how will we *do* better?



ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is divided into two main sections. In the first, we present findings from community conversations held throughout San Diego County. In the second, we discuss some key implications of those findings. Throughout, you will hear the voices of everyday people across our county talking about community and about education. You will hear the voices of impassioned San Diegans, who care about the future of children in our region, whether they are parents or not.

The community conversations on which this report is based were conducted by United Way of San Diego County from September 2010 through January 2011. In all, 15 conversations took place with hundreds of participants, and reflections on those discussions were shared with United Way Worldwide. Participants represented 58 zip codes around the county and ranged in age from young adults to seniors. They represented residents from neighborhoods in North, South, Central and East County.

The group was split 60/40 women to men, and was ethnically diverse, including 25% Latino, 16% African-American, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2% Native American and 51% Caucasian. One conversation was conducted in Spanish to better capture the spirit of people's remarks. We talked to recent high school graduates, educators, business people, parents, grandparents, academics and community leaders. We spoke to them "kitchen table" style in meeting rooms, libraries and community centers.

Using a 90-minute to 2-hour discussion format, we explored participants' views and aspirations when it comes to community and education.

Lastly, for perspective, we include selections from a national report released on March 31, 2011, at the United Way Education Town Hall. United Way Worldwide also commissioned a national poll on community mobilization and education in January 2011. Selections are included in this report.

WHAT WE LEARNED

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. The 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 across the country. What we heard formed the basis of a national report "Voices for the Common Good: America Speaks Out on Education." The voices of many San Diegans were included in that national report. In addition, United Way Worldwide commissioned six focus groups and a national poll to add texture to the conversations.

In San Diego, we talked to 15 groups of people in communities from Chula Vista to Oceanside and from El Cajon to Hillcrest. We asked everyday people — educators, parents, students, business leaders — specifically what they thought about education.

Here's what we heard:

People across all demographic lines, from all walks of life, believe we are failing our children. They see education as the key to success; they believe that the only way children will be successful is if the entire community wraps its arms around them. Many talked about the needs of the "whole child" whose world outside school can

dramatically impact success in the classroom.

San Diegans also see good schools and good communities as inextricably linked. Their aspirations for a good community encompassed concepts such as safety, health, quality public education, fairness and economic prosperity. They used words like "vibrant," "stable" and "thriving" to describe how this ideal community looked and felt. Participants felt that when people lack jobs that provide a stable, living wage, it affects their ability to participate fully in children's education and the community's ability to maintain great schools. To many, education is about fairness with equal access for all students, no matter their parental situation, economic background or geography. Across demographic lines many felt that all kids should have the same opportunity to get a good education. To one person it was "ideally a right of citizenship."

Many talked about community as a place with a sense of family, where people know each other and look out for one another's children. Some used the words "community connectedness" and "family" to describe their ideal vision for San Diego County. Still others said that a healthy community should include recreation departments and green space such as parks — so people can spend time with family and their neighbors. Many longed openly for the days when neighbors knew one another and watched out for each other's children.

THE NATIONAL VIEW

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."
- 92 percent agree "we should work to make sure lower income school districts get more funding from the state."
(52 percent strongly agree)

San Diego's concerns largely reflected the nation's, with a few notable exceptions. Participants said:

- California's budget cuts have impacted our schools and teachers dramatically, thus affecting our students.
- Our diverse immigrant population, including refugees, often makes education a cultural and linguistic challenge.
- Our economy — with its heavy base in small business, hospitality and tourism — has many parents working hard but not earning a living wage.

The specific themes heard in San Diego closely mirror national themes with a twist that reflects our region's geography, economy and population.

- **Schools and Communities are Inextricably Linked**
- **Parents Feel Shut out by Public Schools**
- **Schools Should Instill Values as well as Educational Standards**
- **We're at a Turning Point in Education**
- **We All Must Take Ownership of Schools and Communities**
- **Language and Culture are a Challenge to Parents, Students and Educators**



People believe that good schools and good communities go hand-in-hand.

San Diegans have a strong desire for connection — a sense of community where neighbors know each other and support one another; where children are valued and encouraged to reach their full potential; and where, through education, they all have an equal opportunity to succeed. Without exception, participants revealed a strong belief that schools were central to the community, a place where all these factors converged, including diverse cultures, languages and faiths.

For this reason, connection was said to be critical — a sense that families and children were respectful of different ideas and voices, that there was room for everyone in the community. One man said, "You look at a community as your community; you're not exclusionary. Whatever happens, good or bad, we take care of the community." The idea of people looking outside of themselves to the greater community was echoed by one person who said, "I think unfortunately my generation is the entitlement generation. We want to get where we want quickly. We think we're Paris Hilton, but we're not. We're focused on the wrong things. My ideal community would include people who legitimately cared about one another. Who are invested in challenges that touch all of us."

A recurring theme in many conversations was the physical aspects of community. Some wanted clean, beautiful environments — green, open space for community gardens and parks. One person said, "What we need are cleaner streets, greener cars, more trees..." Another added that they wanted "a green community — solar power,

wind power — to live in harmony with the earth and not destroy [it]." Others spoke of houses and communities that were "fresh and clean" and appealing places to live.

Like many Californians, San Diegans prize our weather and the natural environment as an essential part of our state's identity. Likewise, education has historically been seen as a statewide stronghold. "California used to be known as the innovator state, the great education state, and in a generation it's turned around," bemoaned one participant from Central San Diego. Years of budget cuts have severely impacted the quality of K-12 education, and San Diegans spoke of the fallout, with funding slashed for teachers as well as after-school programs. One participant put it plainly: "We need a state that values our education process and our kids." Another added, "I keep voting, but I don't see any change."

Issues related to income stability surfaced frequently, with the notion that a person's basic needs must be met before children and families can focus on education. Affordable housing, a living wage — these were all deemed essential to any successful life.

In the context of education, economic pressure played a major role in parental involvement. A South Bay respondent said, "Some parents can't engage. If you have to work three jobs, how do you get to your child's school, and be engaged in their education?" From a different conversation in a different part of the county, a woman admitted, "I am lucky not to have to worry about my income — but we need to

help parents who are working three jobs.” People also recognized the added pressure this placed on teachers in the classroom when youth are hungry or sick or worried about family stresses.

People want to feel safe and secure.

Safety was one of the first things many people wanted to talk about when discussing their community. They spoke of the need for safe streets and neighborhoods in which kids can come and go without incident; where parents do not have to be concerned about whether their kids will make it to school. Many lamented the days when this was not a concern and spoke of the value of everyone in the community caring for *all* children.

Some expressed a common concern that if we can't create a safe and stable environment for kids, nothing we do will help them achieve success. “We need to look at the child as a whole person, not just as a student,” said one person. “It's too difficult to improve education outcomes when there are all these negative social conditions around the kids.” For most participants, crime, drugs and domestic violence were top concerns. They felt safety was a fundamental requirement in a community.

“When we grew up, we used to all be outside playing. As kids, we were involved in the community. Now it's hard to find a place in San Diego where kids can go play and be safe. You can't let

kids go out in the front yard, let alone out into the larger community.”

Education drives economic change.

Education is the beginning of economic viability and a foundation for a sustainable future, agreed most of the participants. In their view, education provided better economic opportunities, stable, less-stressed families and advancement opportunities for children. “A whole community really starts with education,” concluded one person.

Many locals spoke very specifically about the lack of training to prepare children for the “21st-century work world.” One said, “When Qualcomm can't hire anyone from San Diego, you have to say it's a problem. Kids aren't learning what they need for the jobs in 20 years.” “We were the industrial giants and now we just provide services to others,” another lamented. A third person said, “The curriculum needs to be built for the future, for the economy and environment we're in, and where we are headed.” One said using technology would be smart. “Learning should be flexible and fun. They should make better use of technology.” Several others echoed the sentiment that technology was an integral part of the life of today's students and should be used in classrooms.



People feel disconnected from schools.

Some area residents said they couldn't trust schools to really understand what is happening in the community and the challenges their children face. One San Diegan said, “Parents are getting farther and farther away from the schools; no one is taking time to invest in the school. We used to have parents involved and knowing what was going on.” But many parents said they did not think educators understood the economic pressures they face or realize that their inability to obtain adequate transportation or time off from work was often the reason for lack of participation. Some wondered why businesses were not more flexible in giving parents time off to attend parent-teacher conferences. Others said local government should “make transportation more accessible.”

One person complained that in spite of teachers' efforts to engage parents, many parents don't seem to understand their importance in the process and don't show up to parent-teacher conferences. In another conversation, a participant did not feel the problem was limited to lower-income families. One person said she had learned that disengaged

parents were an issue even in more affluent areas “there is a huge, totally disconnected group of parents — they assume it's a good school, and that the school is taking care of their kids; the economics may be different, but the engagement level is the same; they don't understand.”

“Parents are getting farther and farther away from the schools; no one is taking time to invest in the school.”

In every conversation, people talked about the positive impact on children and the schools in their community when parents are fully engaged. “When parents are engaged, nurturing and providing discipline at home, then teachers are engaged,” said one person. “You want teachers that are engaged and enthusiastic about teaching. Teachers go sour because they are not there to discipline and control the children — that is what parents are for.”



“In the Hispanic community the parents can’t really speak with the teachers because of the language difference. They can’t communicate. So the kids are left without the backing of the parents and are taken advantage of in class—the teachers yell at them to intimidate them, then the kids never speak up anymore.”

Parents don’t feel welcome.

Many local parents said they don’t always feel welcome in schools and that sometimes teachers put “parameters” around their participation. “Parents are...unwelcome and not heard,” one participant said. Another added that parents may want to be involved but struggle with barriers, such as communication. “So many parents don’t speak English that they are uncomfortable going to schools,” one person said. For others, it was a cultural issue: “There are cultures that don’t even know that they can get involved in schools — that it’s even allowed.”

Lack of fairness

Most participants commented that every child should have a quality education regardless of where they are living, but the realities of geography and economics tell a different story. According to some, the economic disparities between North, South, Central and East County, which have differing tax bases, limit equal access to a good education. One person talked about the contrast, noting that funds from affluent communities are “plugged into the schools, and more depressed areas

don’t have that income stream.” As a result, the students have a different educational experience. “Looking at Chula Vista, there is clear boundary between East and West; it’s not equal,” said one person. The same person continued, “The schools with the highest test scores are in the East; why is that, is it social economic conditions? Are the teachers better in the East? Why aren’t kids in East and West learning at the same pace?”

Military families face special challenges.

Some talked about San Diego’s huge population of military personnel, explaining that a lot of families don’t grow roots here. In a separate conversation, another participant agreed, saying, “There are lots of transients. Kids sometimes get lost in a shuffle. Families don’t build strong community connections because they move on.” One parent said, “Do I want to get connected knowing that I will [only] be here only two to four years?”

A military dad explained, “We move all the time so even getting documentation from the old school to the new school on time is difficult. We’re always moving and starting over.” Many said that it affects

the cohesiveness of the community and a military parent’s ability to engage with schools. In one conversation, a participant agreed, saying, “I think the military presence in San Diego affects how much people want to care about each other because people think, ‘Why should I bother getting to know them, they are going to be gone anyhow.’”

Immigrant and refugees feel disconnected.

Community members from the South Bay, City Heights, Escondido and El Cajon described the additional challenges they face because they are non-native speakers. Some talked about the difficulty many parents have in learning how to navigate the system or communicating with teachers. “Our immigrant families don’t know the support systems that we have in health-care, the school system and financial systems. The schools will benefit if parents know about resources and use them,” said one San Diegan.

Others said parents may feel uncomfortable going into schools because of their own lack of education. They explained that often Latinos and Middle Easterners do not believe it is their place to interfere with what educators do in the school and that it is not traditionally part of their culture to do so. One East County participant, speaking of Iraqi parents,

said, “In our country we don’t get involved. They never allowed us to go. Our opinion was never valued by the government or the system. It’s a shock for them [parents], they have to learn this.”

Still others expressed discomfort with language skills and parents’ ability to communicate effectively. “In an area that is Latino or mixed, there are language issues. The children understand the teacher, but they don’t feel comfortable expressing themselves and being creative in the language. The teachers can’t communicate with them,” said one participant. Another said parents felt uncomfortable going into schools for different reasons and educators shouldn’t be so quick to condemn. “Teachers have to be inclusive and flexible with parents who work extra jobs and don’t feel comfortable in the school environment; maybe they didn’t have much education themselves,” explained one person.

For some, when children choose school over working to support their family’s basic needs, it can create a dilemma. One Central San Diego participant explained, “In some cultures, work ethics are valued but not education. They see it as a betrayal almost. You have to do something for the family. Education is too individualistic.”

Children need more than academic support.

Many San Diegans felt that educating a child was not just about academics. “We need to look at the child as a whole person, not just a student. It’s too difficult to improve education outcomes when there are all these negative social conditions around the kids,” explained one person. In Hillcrest a former teacher described the importance of what goes on outside of school. “I think it’s important to have a support system for kids who have problems. I used to play a game with my kids where I asked them questions about their favorite food, but then I would ask what I wanted to know: ‘How many of you had breakfast this morning? How many didn’t have dinner last night?’ and the hands would go up.” This person concluded by saying, “And you wonder why they were on their desks with their arms folded, asleep? We need food and nutrition programs, we need to open the libraries again. All the things we had for decades when we were growing up. Put them back into the schools.”

One parent said education should be a partnership between teacher and parent. “We should hold parents more accountable for what their kids do in school. Teachers end up teaching kids basic life lessons.” Another added, “Teachers

need to focus on students’ education. Parents and teachers should work hand in hand on the same team.”

Many participants cited the importance of adults other than parents in motivating students and providing them with a view into the future. One person said, “Role models are important. When you look at the kids who dropped out, look at the parent: they probably dropped out and are barely surviving, working for \$9 or \$10 an hour.” In another conversation, someone said, “We need a stronger partnership with the business community — helping to mentor youth to provide job training and job readiness.” One San Diegan said, “High school students with adult leadership and mentorship are doing such amazing things — there just aren’t enough mentorship/internship programs.”

Children should be taught values, manners and tolerance.

The national report revealed a concern for what people perceive to be students’ lack of respect for teachers and lack of personal accountability to be part of their own education. There was also a strong theme that the faith community could be part of the solution.



The faith community was not mentioned consistently in San Diego; however, there was the suggestion that since effective education takes the community and the schools working together, that faith-based organizations might be an untapped resource. A number of people cited the positive effect of mentors and role models in teaching kids core values. Someone from North County said, “I didn’t have a mentor, and I did a lot of bad things when I was in school. I needed a mentor, so as an adult I’ve been promoting having mentors and seeing how successful it is.”

Some talked about the changing demographic mix in their communities and the lack of tolerance among various groups. They also talked about the positive steps that were being made in addressing the issue. One East County resident said, “There’s a high concentration of Middle Easterners. Sometimes there is resentment and a lack of understanding. With this new wave

of immigrants, other groups feel they’re being forgotten. Now we’re building bridges between newcomers and earlier refugees.”

Many residents spoke of “celebrating the cultural richness of the children at a particular school.” They wanted to see, as one person put it, “young people who celebrate each other’s cultures. I would like to see a level of understanding of not just leadership or teachers, but students.” A Central San Diego participant described the progress in holding up and celebrating diversity. One felt that the U.S. had lost perspective on the value of immigrants in building the country. “In Europe and other places, speaking multiple languages is valued and totally normal. Here, English as second language is perceived as a negative.”

We're at a turning point in education.

Across San Diego County people said, although there were pockets of improvement, our kids still don't have what it takes to succeed in the global economy. "We're in a real scary place but nobody wants to look at it. We're in a crisis," said one San Diegan. Many said there is a need for more "real world" education and complained that schools are "behind the times" and not relevant to today's youth. California's cuts in education funding were repeatedly cited as a troubling trend.

Participant after participant pointed out that a consistent education experience was not happening

"The education system is like a burning building. I feel strongly enough about it to run into that burning building and save as many as I can."

for every child, whatever the reason. "We need to get back to high achieving with equal access to excellence. We are not there at all," said someone in one conversation. Another former teacher said, "I'm a gay man — I don't have kids but I care about my students. I come from a big Italian

family. I think everyone from every generation should get involved. It's a community crisis."

Traditional public schools, private and charter schools were all praised and criticized. "Private school doesn't necessarily equate to a better education — I'm a product," pointed out one person. Someone said where these schools often differed was in discipline and parental engagement "I think those are the parents that tend to be involved — the ones who end up putting their kids in private schools." One person wondered, "Are charter schools the answer to so many of these questions? The data is there; look at the schools where youth are achieving at a higher rate, some have great results, some not." This same person concluded, "We need options, a continuum of options."

For many people we listened to, the path forward is unclear and they are uncertain where to place their trust, other than in themselves. Others were more specific in saying that parents, businesses, churches, government leaders, nonprofits, educators and students themselves must play a role.



Schools can't do it alone — the whole community must be involved.

Most of the San Diegans who participated in community conversations felt it was unrealistic to expect teachers and schools to do it all. "We need to look at what the community can do for the school. It's all on the schools now; the community needs to be involved," said one person. Another was angry that "we dump on educators and don't take community responsibility for making youth successful." Still another said, "The school house can't teach them everything; we have to be willing to teach them in the neighborhood."

People saw a strong connection between the success of individual children and the success of the larger community. One person captured the view of many participants when he said, "Education is everybody's problem. The functionality or dysfunction of these students will be for all of us to deal with. I'm going to be affected by what these kids are going to contribute or not contribute to society. I think it's all of our jobs to do something to help them." The well-known phrase "it takes a village" was used numerous times, by a cross-section of people, to capture this sentiment.

For many, there was a clear call-to-action and personal accountability. In the words of one San Diegan, "If the parents and teachers take the ball. If the community says this is important and stands up, then politicians may listen if they want to be re-elected. It starts with us. We tell politicians, *this is what is important*. We come together and voice what is important." Another said "We have to do it as a community, as a whole — the parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and neighborhood. It has to start as a movement."

In all the conversations, we found that people are calling on one another to step up and get involved. "As a parent, what are you doing to make sure your kids get an education?" said one parent. "We need a system where the whole community is responsible for kids learning; so when parents don't have time the child still gets the help they need. If you know the kid down the street is struggling, then you can help tutor him," said another person.



SUPPORTING TEACHERS AND THE “WHOLE CHILD”

ALTHOUGH THE FINDINGS IN BOTH NATIONAL AND LOCAL REPORTS ARE CLEAR THAT IT WILL TAKE THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY TO HELP OUR CHILDREN SUCCEED, MANY SALUTED THE EFFORTS OF TEACHERS. THEY SAID MORE SHOULD BE DONE TO INCREASE THE NUMBERS OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS AND THE SUPPORT, RESOURCES AND TOOLS THEY NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL.

“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.”

—John Dewey

The national view:

In 2009, United Way Worldwide received funding through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to support a strategic communications and advocacy initiative to build public support for reform around teacher effectiveness. The grant funded conversations with 1,200 parents, teachers and students, business leaders and law enforcement and many others on this topic of teacher effectiveness. In rural, suburban and urban communities people talked about strategies to support and grow the number of great teachers and to create a pipeline for years to come.

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 about and support

teachers and point to the following characteristics as distinguishing the great ones:

- The most effective teachers set high expectations and emphasize rigorous academics.
- The most effective teachers connect instruction to the real world and a relevant future.
- The most effective teachers are subject matter experts who understand the material they are teaching.
- The most effective teachers maintain open lines of communication with students, parents, other teachers and the larger community.

A perspective on the “whole child”

Research studies abound that support the view that if children do not show up to school ready to learn, they will not succeed. Further, the importance of a safe, healthy home environment and quality early learning experiences are viewed by many to be critical. The majority of San Diegans agreed that kids needed to feel secure and be healthy and cared for by loving parents and caregivers to succeed in school and life.

“We need to meet the basic needs of the kids first — ensure shelter, food, safety,” said one person. Others said we need to “identify mental health issues and give treatment” where needed. In talking about the conditions for success, one person said, “We need to start early; we can’t start in high school to show kids opportunities. We can’t cram everything into four years. We have to start at preschool to nurture these kids.” A North County resident agreed saying, “We need to give kids opportunities starting from birth to prepare them to learn. You have to be healthy and well prepared to be a learner.”

THE WHOLE CHILD

One participant, who works with youth and families, told a story about a family with four children, all of whom have a serious attendance problem. One child missed all of 9th grade. The person characterized the student’s situation by saying, “High school graduation is at risk for him — college or vocational skills aren’t a concern for him — that’s too far out of what he thinks he can accomplish. Right now he’s concerned about his shelter and food. He is concerned about being safe. These kids are not worried about math and science, they are worried about where they’ll be tomorrow and will they get there safely.”



“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 nationally partnered with Participant Media on the 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 to “WAITING FOR SUPERMAN” and bring people together to spark a vital discussion about the state of education. Using a modified version of United Way’s 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.

In San Diego, United Way hosted a screening of the movie followed by an informal, moderated discussion. Nearly 200 area residents participated and shared their desire to see the future of education improve for children in our community. Because of the departure from the standard format used in the 90 minute conversations, the results of this conversation were not included in the report. However, many of the themes people raised were similar and the discussion just as impassioned. The voices of the movie attendees helped to round out the view of many San Diegans that while many good things were happening in the County, more needed to be done by all of us if we were to improve the situation for the next generation.

In other parts of the country, local United Ways served as campaign managers for Participant Media’s social action campaign. Specific 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

For more on “WAITING FOR SUPERMAN” and Participant Media’s social action campaign, visit www.waitingforsuperman.com/action.



IMPLICATIONS: MOVING FORWARD

“You have the power. You need to create the change for yourself.”



What is our view on what we heard? We were heartened by the recognition that schools can't do it alone — that the entire community needs to mobilize around the issue and take specific, sustained action to help children. Across demographic, economic and neighborhood lines, San Diegans were united in their view that we all need to be part of the solution. Our listening sessions yielded themes very much in line with the national findings:

- 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.

FROM THE NATIONAL REPORT:

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.

The community should act now and act as one.

Said one frustrated participant, “We always do a lot of talking about problems, but nothing is done about developing solutions for the problems.” Someone else said that the solution “needs to be grassroots, the communities have to decide to become involved again.” One frustrated resident said “it's time to quit bitching and moaning — if we do care, quit talking about it — it's time to get busy.”

In general, we “should all do less finger pointing” and unite around solutions said many of the participants. “One of the changes is not to make education a political football. You can't have someone's career riding on that. We need to take away from all these different interests. Education should be sacrosanct, not a political wedge.” In many of the conversations, the battle over teachers' unions was brought up as another example of how education was too politicized. People told us there was room for compromise on both sides and that people should walk the talk when they say “it's about the kids.”

When talking about the immigrant and refugee

communities that are part of San Diego County, one East County resident said that more should be done to understand their culture and address the needs of this sub-group of students. The person cited progress being made, saying “people are learning about the refugees coming in. We have both cultures learning from each other: It's a bridge that's trying to be built.”

Similarly, military parents said that all schools should be cognizant of the special needs of their children. They said schools can proactively build connections between these children with their classmates, provide mental health and other counseling where needed. Other community members were asked to support them through tutoring, mentoring or other support.

There was also a call for flexibility on the part of businesses to give parents time off to attend school events and parent-teacher conferences. “Businesses need to be involved. Both parents work, but don't have the time off to be able to go to the schools. Businesses need to offer more time to parents,” said one person.

I trust “people who are optimistic, who want to make change, not throw stones.”

A South County resident said community leaders should expand options for busy working parents. “Ideally there would be after-school programs at every school, whether free or on a sliding-fee scale,” said this participant. “Right now a lot of parents can’t afford that care; they’re giving up their jobs, and not all schools have after- and before-school programs.”

Others commented that “the business community needs to get involved with the schools to provide internships.” “High school students with adult leadership and mentorship are doing such amazing things — there just aren’t enough mentorship or internship programs,” said one person. Another person wanted the efforts to go beyond the usual, saying, “We need to focus on more than just math and science. We need to bring in internships and vocational training.”

Solutions should meet the needs of the whole child.

Any solution should recognize that school readiness begins at home, offered many participants. It was clear that the social, nutritional, emotional and developmental needs of children were

seen as integral to their success. When people talked about what kids really need, they offered a holistic view of the solution: “We need to meet the basic needs of the kids first — ensure shelter, food, safety” and that “mental and physical well being has to be there before you can learn.”

Both children and parents need education.

Many participants felt that education was not just about educating each child, but the parents too. They felt many parents were unaware of available resources or about changes in their child’s behavior or what was going on in classrooms. Parents needed to reach out and teachers need to talk to parents to get them involved. This dialogue was seen as critical, with benefits such as improved parent and student engagement. “Engaged students become engaged citizens,” someone said.

In East County a participant suggested parental education as one approach saying, “The Moms are involved — the Dads drop the Moms off at the meetings then come back to pick them up. They are not interested in going to the meetings. They need classes on how to be better men —

better parents.” Another said, “When school begins, we need a class for the parents too. When the kids first start, we should have a class to tell the parents how to do this. The most important school is in the home.”

Improving education isn’t a quick fix.

San Diegans recognize that improving the system won’t be easy: When it comes to education, people may speak in black and white terms, but they recognize the gray. Though many feel disconnected from schools, they also acknowledge the extraordinary efforts of teachers, who they say are often undervalued. Similarly, participants in these conversations agreed that although graduation rates are alarming and disheartening, they recognized that it didn’t happen overnight. The majority said we must intervene for children at every stage of the learning process.

Members of the community repeatedly said there was only a focus on the problem, not the solution. They want to see the successes in communities and schools being held up and celebrated.

Some felt kids and teachers were “the unsung heroes” dealing with a broken system and yet still doing their best. Several commented that teachers are expected “to do so much with so little.” Said one participant, “I would like to see good stuff that’s happening being celebrated. That’s what gives me hope. It’s happening. Eighteen languages in one school. It’s amazing what

those teachers and administrators have done. But you don’t hear about it.”

When talking about the kinds of support teachers needed, there was a consistent call for smaller class sizes so that educators could give children proper attention. Many complained that “class sizes were too big” and that “teachers don’t have the time” to do what is needed.

Moving forward

The desire to move forward was clearly articulated in every conversation, with people ready to hold themselves accountable. “You have to change yourself,” one person said. “Be the change. I believe in myself and the people around me. I wouldn’t have had this opportunity in a hundred years if I was in Iraq. I see lot of changes, it makes me believe.” One person summed up by saying, “It’s unreasonable to expect a miracle; we’re going to have to get in and slug it out.”

Throughout our listening sessions, we heard consistent themes and suggestions for taking action. Many of these solutions have research-based studies that support their effectiveness and allow both individuals and organizations to play a role in supporting students and educators. It will be important for nonprofits, school districts and other community groups to frame volunteer opportunities in ways that resonate with people’s aspirations for their community and for education.



“A child miseducated is a child lost.”

—John F. Kennedy

How everyday San Diegans can help:

Volunteer to read, tutor or mentor a child.

Reading tutors help children improve their reading and also function as role models. Young children are learning to read at an early age, then reading to learn. Exposure to English-language readers is particularly helpful to those students for whom English is not their primary language.

Become an engaged parent.

Parents are children’s first teachers and strongest role models, whether positive or negative. With parental support, including an expectation of personal accountability, students perform at a higher level.

Advocate for high-quality preschool programs.

Research shows that school readiness is a strong predictor of academic success.

Questions we should ask ourselves:

- 1) What can we do to help students in out-of-school settings?
- 2) How can schools, families and communities be partners in supporting student success?
- 3) How can we begin or continue an inclusive conversation throughout our community about how to share positive values with children?

How organizations and community leaders can help:

Maintain or institute family-friendly business practices.

Conversation participants repeatedly spoke of the importance of business owners and managers giving flexibility to parents to be more engaged in schools as volunteers or to connect with teachers.

Expand internships opportunities for high school students.

In most of the conversations, there were calls to connect academic work with the real world. Many participants thought internships that helped students make this connection would motivate them to stay in school.

Connect the skills and talents people already have to volunteer opportunities.

Nonprofits and other organizations should look for ways to use volunteer talent that matches their interests and skills. For example, business people make great career coaches or mentors for high school students. Younger adults are more likely to excel as academic tutors. Non-academic volunteers such as coaches can often motivate student-athletes in ways that educators cannot.

Policy makers should not offer “silver bullets.”

There is a clear understanding among conversation participants that any solution will need to address a complex, interconnected set of challenges in “fixing” education. It was clear to San Diegans that while there could be improvements made by educators in teacher effectiveness, administration and parent engagement, other members of the community needed to step up their involvement. Policy makers were asked to:

- Prioritize education funding.
- Support high-quality preschool programs.
- Create consistency in training and certification of preschool aides.
- Enhance and support communitywide programs and resources that encourage engaged learning.



Questions we should ask ourselves:

- 1) How might we leverage people's belief that something needs to be done to bring diverse stakeholders to the table to work together on solutions?
- 2) What can we do to connect the needs of schools with the aspirations of community members and vice versa?
- 3) 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?
- 4) If we run an organization or a business — how can our initiatives include helping children develop life skills and values?
- 5) How can we work with partners to address children's academic and non-academic needs?
- 6) Are our strategic approaches aligned with people's aspirations in our community, and do they address diverse, rather than "one size fits all" solutions?
- 7) How can volunteer strategies contribute to large-scale impact?
- 8) How do we help individuals see how their efforts fit into to larger change?

Now that we know better, we *must* do better.

Because we are all in part responsible for the education problem, we all must be part of the solution. Based on the 15 conversations conducted, it's evident that people in San Diego want to improve education for their children and their children's children. They want to join in the efforts that connect them to one another and to actions that will have a direct bearing on San Diego's future. People from all walks of life understand the importance of working together on education.

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.

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Thank you to all the generous San Diegans whose voices are lifted up in this report. Our goal is to make sure that these voices are heard and that they help shape how all of us work together on education in the future.

About United Way of San Diego County

Celebrating its 90th anniversary this year, United Way of San Diego County (UWSD) is a nonprofit organization that improves lives and creates long-lasting change. The United Way movement addresses the underlying causes of problems and mobilizes the community to solve education, income and health issues. LIVE UNITED is a call to action for everyone to become part of the change. To learn more or to donate, visit www.uwsd.org.

About United Way Worldwide

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.

Community Conversation Guide Development and 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.

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