

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - How Newspaper Coverage Transforms Policy Issues Into Character Matters: Debate About A School District's Test Scores



1. Introduction

Eliasoph (1998, p. 210) argued that "Reading the local newspapers . . . did not help citizens make connections between politics and everyday life, did not help them learn about the art of political debate, and inadvertently discouraged them from speaking out in a public-spirited way." The dominant practice for reporting local events, she opines, tends to drain the political out of whatever is going on. Unlike national and international news, balance is rarely needed for local issues; local activities are presented as factual events rather than as issues that warrant debate and reason-giving. Such a state of affairs, quite often, is NOT the case in local U.S. communities when the issue concerns a school district's educational policy. In Boulder Valley School District (BVSD), this paper's focal case, the community's main newspaper was not fostering apathy. Not only did its news and editorial pages regularly present a variety of debates related to BVSD activities, but on certain occasions the paper became an initiator of a controversy. Such was the case in May of 1997 in the heated discussion about the district's 4th grade reading test scores that occurred in the newspaper and board meetings.

School board meetings are a particularly American institution, finding their roots in the early 20th century progressive movement that treated education as a community "good," democratic but not very political, in the same category as, for instance, road repair. A typical board meeting brings together elected officials, citizens, and school staff in a district to make decisions. Meetings also serve as screening sites, using citizen commentary, permitted at certain meeting moments, to identify issues that should become a focus of later board deliberation (Craig & Tracy, 2005).

This study is part of a larger project examining dilemmas and discursive strategies of “ordinary democracy” in local governance groups (Tracy, forthcoming; 1999; Tracy & Ashcraft, Tracy & Muller, 2001). This paper focuses on the controversy about BVSD’s reading test scores. Following a brief overview of the controversy, I describe the arguments forwarded by various BVSD players, organizing them into two lessons that the participants’ discourse teaches about publicly-made education arguments. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the advantages and troubles that the *Camera*, the community’s local newspaper, encountered in its civic journalism motivated efforts to foster community engagement.

2. *The Controversy and Its Discursive Unfolding*

The controversy began with a lead editorial in the Sunday newspaper that proclaimed “reading scores are shocking” that went on to inform readers that “Twenty-eight percent of our fourth graders are reading *below* grade level. More than one out of four. Alarming? You bet. What is going on?” (Camera, 1997, May 18, p. 2E) In the editorial, the 12 schools with the largest percentage of “below grade level” children were identified, along with the exact percent of each school’s students that were below the 50th percentile on the reading section of the California Achievement Test (CAT). Offset in large print in the middle of the editorial was the following assertion: “The problem is fairly obvious: Our schools are doing a lousy job teaching the most important learning and survival skill of all-reading.”

Earlier in the week, board member Riddle had met with the *Camera* editor Hartman to express her concern about how the district was teaching reading. During the meeting Riddle had shared information about the district’s 1996 reading test scores. The next Sunday an editorial appeared criticizing the district’s teaching of reading. In an interview with Hartman I asked him what role he saw the *Camera* taking in developing opinions about issues important to the community.

(1) We really feel that we should be totally objective on news pages, but not on the editorial pages. I thin- we’re (KT: okay) we’re we- we’re being paid to try to understand what’s going on and try to offer some guidance and leadership. And that’s what we do on the editorial pages. But we also provide the whole open forum for the public to respond. For the school board to respond and for uh people writing letters to respond.

In addition to the “lousy job” assertion noted above, five additional claims were contested by one or another party in letters, opinion pieces, and in the subsequent May meeting:

- (1) “Riddle may be on to something” for favoring a “nuts-and-bolts” philosophy” and worrying that the “new educational theories may be doing more harm than good.”
- (2) 28% of the district’s kids are reading below grade level.
- (3) High Peaks Elementary, a core knowledge program that had zero percent of students reading below age level, has teachers that “are doing something unique” that “is worth modeling in more schools.”
- (4) Those who might say scores are not alarming, since they are better than most districts in Colorado, are wrong.
- (5) District shouldn’t let a “hundred more students slip through the cracks” . . . “the mandate is to do something, and to do it now.”

Two days later, and the day before a regularly scheduled board meeting, a news article appeared reporting the reading scores with a table listing the percentage of students below the 50th and 34th percentiles at each of the district’s 30 elementary schools (Taylor, 1997). In addition, the article had a picture of board president Hult followed by a quote saying “If I were an elementary school parent, I would not be comfortable having my child go to a school where somewhere between 30 and 55 percent of kids are not reading at grade level.” At the school board meeting the next night, “reading program and achievement” was an agenda item up for discussion toward the end of the meeting. This meeting brought 37 citizens out to speak and lasted 7 hours. In the weeks following this meeting, the editorial pages of the Camera were full of letters to the editor and opinion pieces, as well as a second editorial by the Camera.

3. Public Arguments about the Reading Test’s Meanings

One feature of this controversy is the impossibility of formulating a single issue which the different parties addressed. Instead, the contention over the reading test’s meaning was a messy argumentative field in which different issues were raised as participants spoke and wrote. Argument scholars have tended to treat issues as straightforwardly “there.” But as Goodwin (2002) has shown, this is rarely the case; in actual disputes an issue arises when someone makes an issue about something another has said or written. Moreover, in issue-raising, emotion and logic are deeply intertwined. Through the language that BVSD participants

used, they made arguments as they conveyed feelings of different kinds and intensities.

Policy-making in education, “involves an appraisal of current conditions, an assessment of why the status quo is not working as it should, and a search for causes and potential solutions”(McDonell, 2004, p. 42). One could gloss what was going on in BVSD as this type of problem solving. The board leadership, in fact, tried to make the policy discussion regarding what to do about the “poor” reading scores the dominant situation frame. As board president Hult commented toward the end of the two-hour discussion about reading achievement:

(2) Line3030

There’s a problem. We need to fix it in the district. That’s really the bottom line here and it should be an unemotional discussion. Rational. Clear. There’s a problem. Things are not what they should be. Let’s fix it.

3.1 Lesson 1: Educational Policy Issues Easily Become Arguments about Character

The definition of educational policy-making noted above relegates issues of actors’ character and competence to the background. This concern, however, was not backgrounded in citizen comments. Citizens treated the Camera editorial and Hult’s remarks as arguments about the competence of key people, or as I would put it, attacks on face (Goffman, 1967). Face presumes that people desire to be respected and seen as competent in all situations; they will inspect what is said (or written) for what it says about who they are. To assert, as the editorial did, that the schools were doing a “lousy job” teaching reading was interpreted by many as an argument that teachers were doing a bad job. Consider just two examples of the meeting commentary.

(3) Parent Comment, Line1862

I will tell you that those are dedicated teachers that they’re often there till 6, 7 o’clock working. And for us not to value their professionalism and to make conclusions that this board feels that they can tell those teachers how to teach to me is just an insult to their professionalism ... please would you include your teachers when you go to make these policies? Would you trust your professionals and involve them when you are trying to, you know, look at programs that work? Because believe me they’re hardworking professionals that know what works with children. Thank you.

(4) Teacher Union President, Line218

We are also angry about the misuse of standardized test scores for political reasons. ((audience applause)) We are confident ((pause)) We are confident that when the whole story on these test scores is out a more balanced picture will emerge about student achievement in Boulder Valley public schools. Teachers are concerned that poor decisions will be made as a result of the misinterpretation of test data. Teachers are angered by the outrageous conclusions that the *Daily Camera* has made in recent days. ((audience applause))

Following public commentary the board discussed the topic. Members of the board majority and its minority did have different positions about whether students' reading performance was a serious problem, but constructing a fair characterization of the stance differences was noticeably absent. Instead, opposing parties offered caricatures of each others' arguments. In actual exchanges, argument-making involves advancing one's own point while characterizing, often indirectly and implicitly, the problematic nature of other party's position. It is in this category of discursive moves - making an argument as one counters another's - that logical position-making and emotion marry. The president, for instance, formulated what minority member Shoemaker was arguing as a claim that there was no reading problem in the district. Notice how Hult's description of Shoemaker's position uses language that robs Shoemaker's position of subtlety, in fact ridicules it (e.g., "let's just uh party"). In turn, Shoemaker (LS) claims that Hult (SH) was asserting the strongest possible character attack that could be derived from a comment that reading scores were shocking ("those teachers are lousy").

(5) Line2976

SH: It's really fine, everything's fine. and it's ok that we have a third of the kids maybe roughly but they're just poor and their parents don't care . . . Uh:: it sounds like everything is going well and we don't really need to do much. And so this has been an overreaction uh:: let's just uh party

LS: I'm not satisfied uh I do think we need to: improve reading in this district What bothers me is the characterization (.) that these figures are shocking. That those teachers are lousy. That the teachers don't ca:re about these children that don't n- the teachers don't know who they are and aren't working as hard as they can (.) to improve the situation. Thank you.

SH: Well then I'm going to respond. We didn't say that? Nobody said teachers are

lousy, nobody said anything along those lines, some of the test scores are shocking but nobody on this board has said that teachers are lousy.

An assessment of whether the tests scores should be judged as poor rested on the meanings that were attached to the scores. In education there are two primary kinds of assessment tests: (1) standards-based tests in which performance at a particular level is defined as a standard for students at a particular grade, and (2) nationally-normed tests in which 50% of test-takers will be below the 50th percentile and 50% will be above. The two kinds of tests are quite different. Standards-based tests make possible that 80, 90 or even 100 percent of students could meet a grade-level standard; nationally-normed tests do not. The CAT was a nationally-normed test; 72% of the district's student had scored at or above the median and 28% had scored below. One meaning of the test scores, then, was that compared to other cities in the US, BVSD had more good readers than most. At the same time, the test results revealed that a significant percent of BVSD children were below the 50th percentile.

Following opinion pieces and comments that problematized the initial move of the newspaper and the board majority to equate "below the 50th percentile" with "below grade level," and in recognition of the district's "diversity," a euphemistic term for students who were ESL, Special Ed, or poor, one strand of the argument shifted to the issue of what would be an acceptable percent given Boulder Valley's character as "affluent" and "well educated." As the *Camera* (1997, May 25. p. 2E) put it in its second editorial,

SO WHAT IS ACCEPTABLE? With the growing diversity in the district, it is unrealistic to set a goal that says no more than 10 percent will be testing below grade level. But what about 12 percent or 18 percent? Are numbers like these unrealistic?

The second *Camera* editorial illustrates another aspect of arguments that is common in public disputes. When individuals or newspaper are heard to be unfairly blaming, that blaming action, itself, becomes accountable. The second editorial said:

The phone calls from parents, teachers, and administrators - and the letters pouring into the Open Forum - are filled with outrage over this newspapers outburst last Sunday over fourth grade reading scores. . . . [L]et us correct a misstatement in last week's editorial that made it appear we were blaming "lousy

teaching” for the problem. What we intended to blame was a system that isn’t getting better results because resource needs of teachers are not being met in these very critical years of a child’s education.

In addition, speakers and writers argued that this inappropriate blaming was evidence of the incompetence and poor leadership of the board majority. As one citizen remarked (Line649) “The conclusions you have reached based on your misunderstandings have damaged your credibility in our schools.” And as another citizen concluded, after explaining the nature of norm-based tests,

(8) Line1699

Cit: this focus on a single misleading percentage produces nothing useful, it’s dangerous and it’s childish. It’s time for this board to act like adults. This isn’t a game. Eh now- ((bell rings)) I will say to the so called Gang of Five that you may think you may get [more

VP: [I’m sorry we cannot i- uh- tolerate attacks on the board please stick to the issues and the policy. Your time’s up. Can you please come to closure please?

Cit: You may think you’ll get more votes out of this in the next election but you don’t- these are very real children you’re putting at risk

If policy development begins with identification of a problem and its causes, then how one formulates the problem and causes matters. In this case, teachers and administrators felt blamed; they did not hear the facts about reading test scores simply as raising a policy discussion about the best practices for teaching reading. The actions of blaming teachers, administrators, and parents that were inferred to be the aims of the board and the *Camera*, in turn, became evidence in a larger argument about the competence and character of the board and the *Camera*. In contrast to the board majority however, the *Camera* (1997, May 25, p. 2E) did significant work to counteract its earlier message. It concluded its second editorial, saying: In spite of the intensity of the latest academic furor, this school district has a reputation for creatively overcoming tough challenges. We have every confidence teachers, administrators, and school board members will conquer this one too.

The character-policy connection did not stop with the first round of argument. Board members who had defended the reading test score numbers as “not shocking” were treated by some as making a “racist” argument, in which they were not holding sufficiently high expectations of minority children (Been, 1997).

There was an additional argument about the character of the community that emerged. Face as a concept has largely been applied to individual communicators, but it can easily be extended to groups and communities (Tracy & Naughton, 2000). As people do, communities, too, have a sense of who they are that they work to uphold in public exchanges. What did these test scores mean about the character and competence of Boulder Valley? Was having 28% of students below the 50th percentile reasonable or, as the *Camera* (1997, May 18, p. 2E) argued, was “that kind of surrender to mediocrity... fine elsewhere but it won't fly in Boulder Valley.” This issue was addressed in the meeting by a representative of School Links, a newsletter that discussed educational issues in Boulder county. Following an identification of herself and the newsletter, the speaker said:

(10) Line494

The primary mission of *School Links* is to inform the community on education-related issues. Because we recognize the complexity of educational topics we probe issues to present varying perspectives. And we try to ask relevant questions. Tonight, first, um *School Links* would of- would like to offer the board some information that we've gathered. Umm *School Links* wanted to know how Boulder Valley stacked up to schools across the country. We found that in standardized reading tests 24% of fourth graders in Ann Arbor scored below the median. We found that 29% of fourth graders in Madison scored below the median. We found that 37.5% of fourth graders in Cherry Creek scored below the median.

The speaker's comment can be seen as disagreement with the *Camera's* position that having 28% of students reading below the 50% percentile should be unacceptable for Boulder Valley. When speakers do comparisons, even when they dispute them, they reveal what category they take their community to be in. Ann Arbor, Madison, and Cherry Creek are not just any towns in the United States; they are especially affluent, educated communities, with two of them also being homes to major universities. In not selecting Los Angeles, Philadelphia, or any of a number of small rural towns in the West as comparisons, the speaker is asserting Boulder's character, as well as making a claim about the reasonableness of Boulder Valley having 28% of fourth graders readers below the median score. Her argument rests on two legs. The first leg is the reasonableness of the comparisons, that is, is the category into which she has put Boulder a fitting one?

A second leg is the implication that a community scoring in the middle of its peer communities - notice how the three scores are a little below, roughly the same level, and a little above Boulder Valley's - is performing reasonably. After several other remarks, the speaker concludes: "The contributors to *School Links* think that the public should question the intentions behind the release of manipulated information which creates panic. Thank you" (Line 515).

What kind of community is Boulder Valley? This question became an argument in itself. The president of the Parent Advisory Council of the BVSD wrote a guest opinion in the newspaper disagreeing with an earlier editorial arguing for switching to phonics-only instruction (Marion, 1997). As evidence for his position, he noted that the schools in Palo Alto (another affluent, educated community as well as the home of Stanford University) used a balanced approach teaching literature and writing stories in addition to teaching phonics. Although the thrust of his editorial was an argument against a phonics-only approach, his argument presumed the suitability of using Palo Alto's practices as a comparison point. But the community comparison had not begun there.

His guest opinion, "Learning to read in Palo Alto and Ann Arbor," had been preceded by a letter headlined, "Boulder is no Palo Alto" (Welch, 1997). Palo Alto citizens, the "Boulder is no Palo Alto" letter argued, are much more homogeneous in their level of education and wealth than are citizens in Boulder. Boulder Valley includes several rural, low income areas; these schools, in fact, scored lower than other schools in the district on the reading test. But even as the writer denied that Boulder Valley should be grouped with Palo Alto, his denial treated the assertion of Palo Alto as an imaginable comparison point. Hence, albeit in a backhanded way, his argument reinforced Boulder Valley's face as an above average community that should not bind itself to average performance criteria.

The first lesson to be gleaned from this controversy, then, is the potential closeness between matters of policy and issues of competence and character. When a policy centrally concerns people's actions - as teaching of reading by teachers using administrator-developed practices in schools that parents have chosen to send their kids to does - or the identity of a community being a certain desired kind, then raising of a policy issue needs to be done with an understanding that issues of character and blame are lurking around the policy issue's edges, if not right in its center.

3.2 Lesson 2: Heated Local Controversies Often Tap Broader US Dilemmas about

Education

This controversy about reading scores tapped three interrelated tensions that are built into American education. A first tension concerns how to divide responsibility for educational policy-making. What is the role for education experts (teachers, administrators, and superintendents) and what is the role for ordinary citizens? “Unlike schooling in every other major industrialized country, public education in this country is democratic and deeply local” (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003, p. 2). Often these two groups are in accord, but when they are not, decision-making becomes difficult, as there is no agreed-upon algorithm for determining whose voice gets privileged. Across US history, standardized tests have been political matters. Standardized assessment tools, particularly as they developed in the 1990s, enabled a shift away from what professionals thought was good education toward what many ordinary people took it to be. For many lay people a good education required getting the basics down, not allowing children to spell “creatively”; teaching of phonics and attending to grammar was crucial. For most professionals, as well as a goodly number of ordinary citizens, education needed to be about fostering engagement with learning, involvement in literature, and avoiding too much drill and rote memorization. These different teaching philosophies, often labeled as the “phonics versus whole language debate” were one part of the policy piece of this controversy. The board majority represented the phonics view, and the board minority and most of the teachers represented the whole language approach. Of note, just about all participants had more subtle positions than they attributed to their opponents: all discussants saw the need for both. They differed, however, as to how much phonics versus literature was best at what stages. Consider excerpts from two guest opinions that argued with each other.

(11) Spokesperson for Coalition for Quality Schools (Charles, 1997, p. 3E)

The workbooks and drills from the 1950s may have a place for some students but they are a poor substitute for schools that challenge and encourage each student at his or her current level. We cannot afford the “one size fits all” philosophy of the current majority.

(12) Guest Opinion (Jaffee, 1997. p. 3E)

Members of the “Coalition for Quality Schools” are those same entrenched forces who brought you Whole Language, invented spelling, phony self-esteem, and now Whole Math. These are not the moderates who want only quality education for

our children. In an attempt to ignore public demands and continue their damaging educational fads and socialization programs, these forces stand hip-to-hip with the teachers' union.

Both writers advance reasonable arguments about what is the best way to teach reading as they damn the other side through the description of what it does and favors. Although (12) uses a greater amount of morally-loaded description terms (e.g., "entrenched forces," "phony self-esteem," "damaging educational fads"), the writer in (11) is no slouch. Describing what the board majority favors as "workbooks and drills from the 1950s" and "one size fits all" is also strongly negative, implying that the majority has a dated, rigid educational philosophy. In addition, the opinion in 8.11 makes visible the large societal debate about who should be making decisions - "the public," who the authors aligns his views with, or the education establishment and those who "stand hip-to-hip with the teachers' union."

McDonnell (2004) traces the debates that occurred in the U.S. in the 1990s about standardized testing. At the state level, "high stakes" testing emerged as a way to hold schools accountable to the larger public. Too many children were not acquiring essential literacy skills needed to function in jobs, and, compared to other Western countries, American students were performing poorly. Standardized tests have been around for a long time; what began to change in the 1990s was a move from treating these tests as "low stakes" instruments that would provide helpful but not reward- or punishment-consequential information to "high stakes" tests in which results would be used to reward and punish students, teachers, schools, and districts. By 2003 slightly more than half of U.S. states had developed policies that attached consequences to their standardized tests. In the mid-90s, Colorado was working out what this would mean for its schools and the 1996 CAT testing was a practice run to allow BVSD to get a sense of how the district might perform once the state determined its meaning for "grade level" (e.g., below the national 50% or the 34%) to which all districts would be held accountable.

In the United States there is strong agreement across just about all groups that there should be standardized testing in schools; consensus disappears, however, when the issue becomes *what* the standards should be assessing (McDonnell, 2004). If standards are to be the carrot (or the stick) that leads schools and classrooms to change, then it is necessary to have a high level of agreement about the content of the standards. This is a politically difficult task. Building standards

requires navigating among citizens' different beliefs about what should or should not be given emphasis in public schools. Should tests emphasize the basics or should they give weight to the complexities of experience (e.g., literature), thereby requiring children to make assessment about what is reasonable or moral? In addition, standardized tests raise a whole slew of practical and technical issues related to test construction. On the one hand, reliability - a key issue if other decisions are to rest on test scores - is more easily established with multiple choice tests. Moreover, multiple choice tests are relatively inexpensive, can be scored easily, and produce their results quickly. All of these are features that are strong pluses for school districts. On the other hand, important learning goals, such as students being able to develop arguments and write, cannot be funneled into multiple choice questions. If only those school goals that are easily testable are tested, and there are high stakes for teachers and schools for test performance, then standardized testing could end up fostering the opposite of what it is supposed to bring about.

The exchange of opinions between cognitive psychologist Blackmon and educational measurement expert Linn, which occurred on the editorial pages of the *Camera*, tapped into these arguments about reasonable design and uses of standardized tests. In her editorial Blackmon (1997, p. 6E) claimed that BVSD schools could change the number of students scoring low on reading tests.

Breaking the bell-curve barrier CAN happen but not without negotiating objective criteria making major changes in BVSD assessment and reporting, reforming BVSD incentive systems, and developing better responses to students who fall short of the standards our community sets.

Yes, Linn (1997, p. 1E) agreed, the CAT "can provide a useful indication of how students in a district perform in comparison to students nationally," but he went on to argue, it is important that the conditions of test use be similar to the national uses. If the stakes for the test in one state are different than is the case nationally, then serious distortions may arise. If there is a mismatch then "it is likely to be the tests, not the content standards, that prevail in guiding instructional efforts." There is no consensus in American society over how to design, use, and interpret standardized test scores. The issue is a technical one, and it is value-based and political. There are no easy answers. BVSD's controversy over reading scores was instantiating this debate.

A final issue within education that the controversy ignited was the way it made

visible holes in the “American dream.” As Hochschild and Scovronick (2003, p. 19) comment, “Education is at the core of the dominant American ideology; it is essential both to create the democratic structure of which Americans are so proud and to provide the tools for success that Americans seek so passionately.” The American dream promises that if individuals work hard, they will get ahead. In this promise, public schools are the main institution for making the dream work; they are the institution that insures that everyone has equal opportunities to succeed. But as everyone knows, the quality of American schools is dependent on the class, race, and ethnicity of its communities. As one citizen commented at the board meeting,

(16) Line 1747

Now fourth grade test scores published in the May twenty-first edition of the *Daily Camera* revealed a number of facts about the quality of reading education in the Boulder Valley School District. We learned that on the average, district scores are higher than anticipated, that children from wealthier neighborhoods are better readers than children from poor neighborhoods, and that higher scores come from schools where parents select their children into homogeneous populations.

Tests can be an instrument in bringing about desired social change, but when stakes are high, they can hurt students who have not had a fair chance to learn what is being assessed. Tests can exacerbate institutional racism, providing one more reason for people to believe that “the wealth of the advantaged is evidence of virtue and the poverty of the disadvantaged evidence of sin.”(Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003, p. x)

At the most concrete level, the BVSD controversy was over how to spend scarce dollars in helping its students read. Should dollars go into regular classrooms for general reading programs or should they go into individualized (and hence more expensive) pull-out programs for students who were having pronounced difficulties? At the time of the May 22nd meeting, the board majority seemed to be headed toward decreasing individualized programs. In situations of scarce dollars, almost always the case, a dollar for at-risk programs is a dollar that doesn't go for programs for average or gifted kids. Where to put resources is an enduring tension in education. Advanced programs enable the most hard-working to get ahead, thereby achieving the American dream; at-risk programs further the American dream's commitment to fairness and helping those succeed who have

been the most disadvantaged. The district should be targeting its dollars here, asserted a teacher at one of the district's bilingual schools: "Don't take it [an existing reading program] apart, give it time... Let's see what happens in two years when those kids are in fourth grade and they do their famous testing and they come up with those scores" (Line1903).

The tensions between funding programs geared to the most academically able versus those designed to help children having academic problems are inescapable, a problem that can be managed better or worse but never entirely solved. The BVSD reading controversy tapped into this dilemma of American education.

4. The Role of Local Newspapers in Public Argument about Education

"Reasoning is a way we assume our identities and give shape to our ethical and social lives" (Crosswhite, 1996, p.65). When people have strong feelings, as Walton (1992) notes, they become willing to speak out, reason in public, and articulate what grieves them. Such reasoning and speaking out was what the citizens of Boulder Valley did in their district's board meeting and on the pages of the local newspaper. Moreover, in the process of speaking out, a public came into being around the messy tangle of issues I described above. The discursive space in which Boulder Valley citizens deliberated about the meanings of the reading test for their community stretched from the newspaper to the board meeting and back again to the paper, with each place used as a resource to advance and counter arguments in the other.

In this controversy, the *Daily Camera* was not merely covering a debate: It initiated it and then shaped its content and trajectory. During this time period, the *Camera* was enacting "civic journalism," a community engagement philosophy that many newspapers adopted in the 1990s. Civic journalism, as Fouhy (1996) defines it, is "an effort to reconnect with the real concerns that viewers and readers have about the things in their lives they care most about," but what exactly civic journalism means varies considerably with the community projects that individual newspapers tackle (Friedland & Nichols, 2002). At the time of the controversy the *Camera* was in the midst of an 18-month task force whose goal was to bring a set of citizens from diverse backgrounds together to develop a set of recommendations about how to improve BVSD schools. In addition to the task force, the *Camera* regularly weighed in on its editorial pages about educational issues, a second practice that newspapers in the 1990s were using to deepen the

political engagement of their communities. The editorial that set the reading controversy in motion was part of the *Camera's* larger civic journalism commitment.

As a movement, civic journalism has been praised and criticized. On the positive side, civic journalism illustrates a way newspapers can sidestep Eliasoph's criticism about local news coverage promoting apathy. It helps citizens get involved in community affairs and provides a forum for deliberation. At the same time, civic journalism has been accused of being "naively idealistic" and "resting on a simplistic notion of community and the common good" (Fouhly, 1996) What the reading test scores "meant," as the *Camera's* first editorial had suggested, was not an obvious, "here's a problem; here's the solution" kind of thing. Interests and sensitivities in various segments of the Boulder Valley community were not cut from the same cloth.

A newspaper's voice, particularly in a community dominated by a single paper, will be loud. Its opinions will be given attention when it pronounces on the actions of people to whom readers are connected. When a problem (e.g., poor reading performance) is, in fact, a complex issue where many reasonable standpoints can be advanced on multiple sides, then a newspaper proposing a solution to "the problem" will create trouble. Perhaps the difficulties Boulder Valley was having with factions and hostility was a reasonable price to pay to create a seriously engaged public. It is important, though, to recognize that absence of apathy among local citizens, a state that the newspaper can be credited as enabling, did not translate into a problem-solving, "common good" oriented community. More likely than not, as this case suggests, a community's avoiding of political apathy will require tolerating, if not valuing, conflict and emotionally-tinged, person-directed arguments: Having large numbers of citizens willing to speak out about political issues goes hand in glove with citizens seeing the personal and community consequentiality of issues.

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