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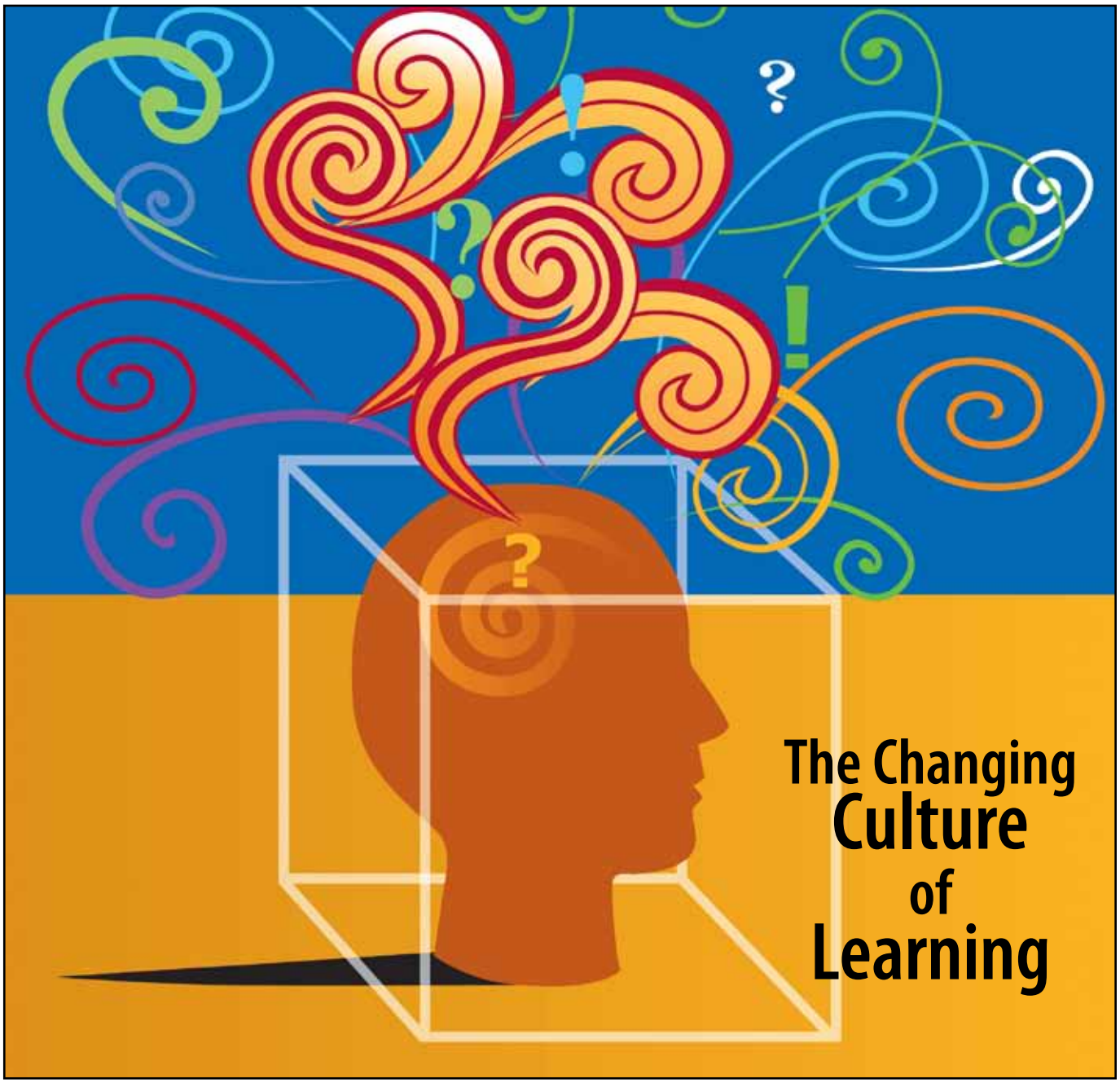
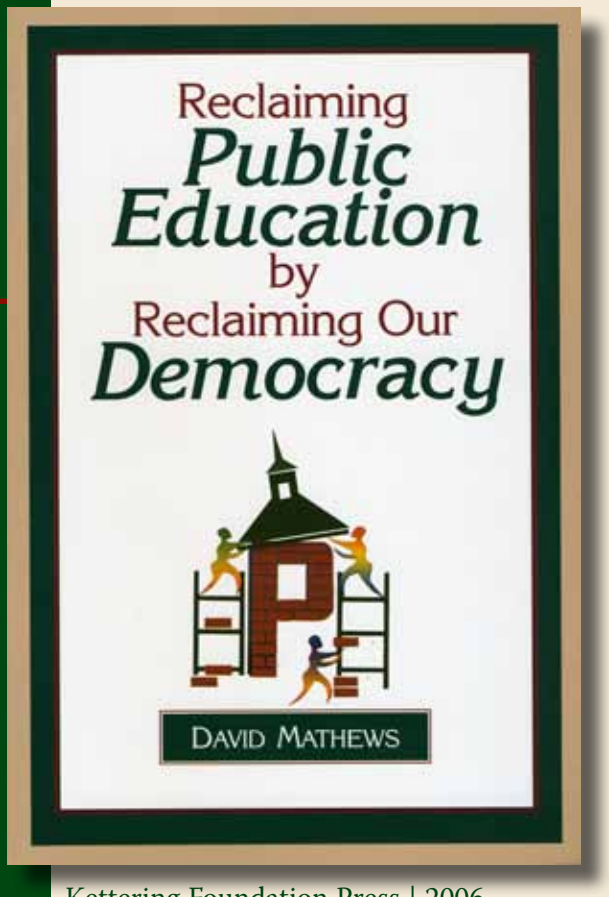


Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy

By David Mathews

In his most recent book, Kettering Foundation president David Mathews considers what citizens and educators alike want from public education and how they might come closer to getting it. Mathews examines the obstacles that block them, beginning with significant differences in the ways that citizens see problems of education and how professional educators and policymakers talk about them. Discussions of accountability, the achievement gap, vouchers, and the like don't always resonate with people's real concerns. Mathews argues that this has resulted in a deep chasm between citizens and the schools that serve them.

Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy updates Kettering's research findings, restates and expands on ideas raised in Mathews' earlier book, *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* (Kettering Foundation Press, 1996), and adds material that illustrates how to build a public for public education.



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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to "the problems behind the problems."

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research organization supported by an endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at **www.kettering.org**.

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Editor
Phillip Lurie

Copy Editor
Lisa Boone-Berry

Design and Production
Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

Illustrations
Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

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Creating a Culture of Learning

Neighborhood Learning Communities in St. Paul

By Lisa Boone-Berry

Through their work at the University of Minnesota's Center for Democracy and Citizenship, Nan Kari and Nan Skelton have learned something. Actually, they've learned many things. And what they learned, in turn, led to more insights, which eventually led to grassroots changes in the education of children in the West Side and East Side neighborhoods of St. Paul, Minnesota. The changes and the journey to implement these changes are detailed in Kari's and Skelton's most recent report to the foundation, *Creating a Culture of Learning in St. Paul: A Framework to Improve Children's Learning.*

Perhaps the seed for future change was planted in 1996 when, in the tradition of Hull House, the Jane Addams School for Democracy came to be. This space was designed to address the educational needs of West Side immigrant youth and their families. Staff from the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, students and faculty from the University of Minnesota and the College of St. Catherine, and West Side community members peopled the Jane Addams school. Those who worked at the school developed learning theories that crossed cultural boundaries and used multicultural perspectives to foster learning and community for the children and families who came to the school and to further their own knowledge of learning.

The educational system in St. Paul's West Side, as in other areas of the United States, functioned on the theory that learning happened in school, with *school* meaning "in the school building." Local school officials and West Side citizens recognized that there were problems. But who defined those problems and who "owned" those problems? Those questions led to an even more frustrating one, who needed to "adapt" so change could take place? The schools? The children and their families?

As is purported in many Kettering Foundation reports and findings, the most successful problem resolutions begin with correctly naming the issue at hand. The same is true here. West Side neighborhood residents saw themselves labeled as "immigrants," a term which carried with it misconceptions and potential misunderstanding. As one would expect, language barriers existed, and the families' frustrations went unheard by the school administration. The community was disconnected from the schools and their children's pursuant learning was disconnected from their cultural background.

The schools in St. Paul's West Side were struggling and the staff at Jane Addams helped them define issues of concern. The neighborhood's immigrant youth and their families had a hunger for a deeper learning that would expand into and connect with the surrounding neighborhood. To create the "fullness of learning" that they sought would require learning inside and outside the school buildings of the West Side. It was determined that a culture of learning already existed piecemeal in the neighborhood. The youth in the West Side community needed access to these resources. Connecting and opening up these resources for the residents created, in essence, a neighborhood learning community. *Neighborhood Learning Communities* are "broadly defined as a coordinated network of people and organizations that work together to build relationships with children and youth in order to strengthen learning and support their holistic, healthy development." A learning community calls on everyone everywhere in the neighborhood to support an educational environment: libraries, businesses, community centers, even parks and other outdoor spaces. And more important, a neighborhood learning community helps eliminate the disconnect between schools and community. Kari and Skelton hold the assumption that "when learning is visible and available throughout the neighborhood, and when many people of all ages are involved in teaching and learning, a culture of learning can be co-created to improve children's learning." Everyone in the learning community had a responsibility to educate, or teach, even the children. And as it turned out, *everyone* would learn—staff, students, and faculty included.

A successful, or healthy, learning community needs a "top-down" and a "bottom-up" approach in order to work—enlisting the knowledge of local officials and institutions AND local residents.

It should be noted that people are inherently competent learners, even though there are many different "languages," or forms, of learning. As a process, learning is not small and should not be compartmentalized. While members of a community work to co-create a framework for learning in their neighborhood, they gain confidence, as well as new roles and identities.

A successful, or healthy, learning community needs a "top-down" and a "bottom-up" approach in order to work—enlisting the knowledge of local officials and institutions AND local residents. As the report details:

> The Neighborhood Circulator [free transportation which connects the learning centers within a neighborhood], as it has come to be known, was an early successful collaborative effort for both neighborhoods that provided needed traction for other innovations to follow. The idea, however, did not originate with organization staff *but with residents who had long thought about a neighborhood trolley*. [Emphasis added.]

Creating a Culture of Learning in St. Paul details some of the characteristics of a healthy learning community:

- The programs are learning based and promote lifelong learning.
- The learning community is co-created, using collaborative politics.
- It is place based and creates connections.
- There is structure, with flexibility, fueled by dialogue and reflection.
- The learning community is linked to larger systems and institutions through relationship building.

When developing a learning community, an infrastructure must first be set to not only ensure its functionality, but also to promote its growth. Important infrastructure characteristics include:

- Access to the programs, providing transportation for all residents
- Forming leadership through a coordinating council or similar body
- Building new relationships to remain a community connector
- Gathering data and evaluating the process consistently

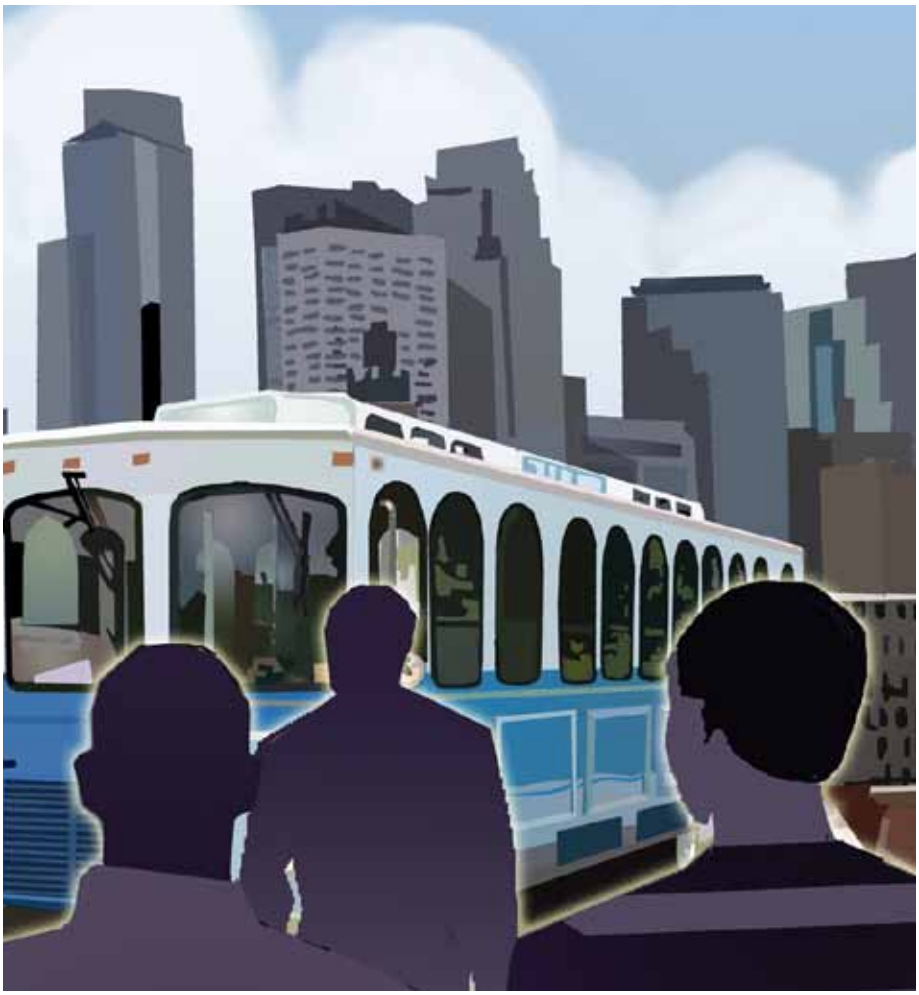
- Providing for professional development
- Allowing for sharing, reflecting, and celebrating

Of course, none of the above characteristics stands alone; they rely upon each other in order to function well. The time and energy needed to set up a solid infrastructure helps avoid or eliminate future obstacles and tensions.

For example, good leaders allow the working group of citizens and institutional members to work through any issues uncovered while planning aspects of the learning community. Making sure that all people are heard (and that they know they've been heard) and helping people to communicate effectively is one way to be certain underlying bad feelings or tensions are avoided.

Allowing for the time needed to build new relationships is also key. A mature relationship is more prone to collaboration rather than simply cooperation. Impatience can be a strong opponent to this concept, but it is important; many projects existed solely as "flash-in-the-pan" events because they lacked the grassroots support that would have given them a toehold in the community. Finally, the report points out the importance of reflection, not metrics, as a way to evaluate the health and growth of a learning community.

This "method of learning" cannot be taught; there are no lesson plans or academic courses available. However, the public work of a learning community can be experienced. It can be discovered while participating in and reflecting on the experiences shared with others while collaborating on this kind of "education," this public work. And, as in all innovative processes, mistakes and experimentation are beneficial.



Next Steps, Next Questions

In 2009, building on the work of the West Side and East Side neighborhood learning communities, the City of Saint Paul and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship initiated the Learning in Cities project. This project "focuses on creating a culture of learning that spans city neighborhoods. The overall aim is to shift the educational system from a school-centered approach to one that utilizes the agency and responsibility of whole communities, including children, families, and many institutions."

While the learning community concept is expanding out from the West and East Side neighborhoods, Kari and Skelton know that still larger questions need to be considered in order to continue, or grow, educational reform in the United States. What are the politics needed to change education? What type of language is needed?—a new effective language for education is key. What type of leader is necessary to co-create an environment of cultural change? How can these ideas be introduced?

There is always the chance that the collaborative atmosphere and functionality of the neighborhoods of St. Paul will stand alone as an anomaly that can't be emulated successfully elsewhere in Minnesota or in the nation. But Kari and Skelton state that theirs has not been a one-step process. The work is constant. It takes continual effort to push away the default, the established system. The reward, however, is worthwhile.

> The formation of learning communities in neighborhoods and cities in conjunction with schools opens new possibilities and resources for broadening and improving learning in the United States. Such an effort also creates new opportunities for public work with a wide range of people. It requires an authentic and long-term community engagement process that taps the learning resources embedded in a place. It begins with a large vision and small, steady steps that show visible change.

Lisa Boone-Berry is a freelance editor and copy editor who works with Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at booneberries@woh.rr.com.

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