

Letting Foundation

# CONNECTIONS

Winter 2006



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# Public Work and Education

Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy is a new book published by Kettering Foundation Press (2006).

There is a fundamental, and insidious, problem in America—the growing divide between citizens and the schools created to serve them. Since 2001, much of the discussion about education policy has revolved around the No Child Left Behind Act. At the center of the discussion are concerns about the best way to measure student achievement, the adequacy of federal funding, and the problem of who should be held accountable for poor student performance. Although important, this discussion tends to ignore the fact that citizens are feeling both estranged from their schools and helpless to do anything about it.

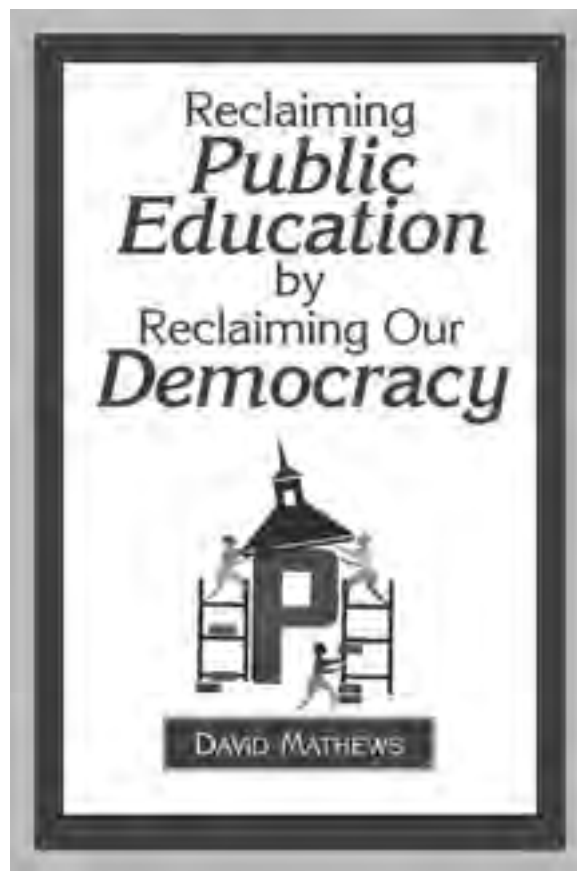
In the Kettering Foundation's latest book, *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy*, David Mathews describes how citizens, educators, school board members, and even policymakers might overcome this divide. There is no doubt that all have work to do, both to bridge the divide and to ensure that children receive a good education. What this book focuses on, however, is the work that the public must do. Reporting on the last ten years of Kettering research, Mathews offers the foundation's most in-depth analysis to date on what sort of work this is; how the public can do it; and why it is essential for strengthening public education, rebuilding the public's commitment to the public schools and, ultimately, reinvigorating and reclaiming our democracy.

Since so many of the most entrenched issues affecting public schools today stem from larger societal problems (such as poverty), educators have long recognized that they need public support, or at least parental support, in order to teach the children in their care. But many complain

they cannot get the support they need. At the same time, Kettering research has found that citizens feel increasingly alienated from the public school system and powerless to change it. This sense of powerlessness, writes Mathews, lessens people's sense of ownership over the schools and thus their sense of responsibility for what goes on inside them. Citizens become more like consumers purchasing goods or services, and they forget the critical role that communities once played in creating and supporting the public schools.

One of the central issues that contributes to the divide between citizens and educators (and also citizens and policymakers) is that they often see problems differently, and therefore use different names to describe them. Political hot button names for issues, such as the achievement gap and accountability, don't actually resonate with most citizens' real concerns. The names either fail to capture the problems that people experience every day, or they fail to take into consideration the conflicting desires and frustrations that people wrestle with. In order to truly represent their concerns, problems need to be articulated and named by the people themselves. When a problem is named in a way that captures people's true concerns, they are more likely to get involved in solving it.

Kettering Foundation research has found that naming collective problems in public terms is incredibly powerful in helping citizens regain ownership of their problems. Therefore, "naming problems in terms of what is most valuable to citizens" is the first of what Mathews calls the six democratic practices. He goes on in the



book to provide a detailed description of the other practices, which include framing, deliberation, making commitments, public acting, and civic learning. Taken together, these practices both make up public work and help "build" the kind of public that schools and communities need.

Rather than a set of techniques or methodologies, Mathews' description of public work and the various practices that make it up is actually a description of the way people naturally engage one another if given the opportunity to help solve common problems. For those familiar with Kettering research, this is a subtle departure from earlier thinking. The focus here is on the larger, organic process of public work; the description of the separate practices is merely an attempt to help people recognize the various aspects of this work.

The key to all of the practices is that they engage the public, both in identifying common problems and in working to solve them. All problems are identified or named by someone; however, when the naming is done *by the public*, it encourages public ownership of the problems, making naming a democratic practice.

## Challenge Three

Ironically, many public engagement efforts inadvertently ignore this, treating the public instead as a group that must be rallied or enlisted around a previously established problem. Yet this undermines the public's role in its own self-determination. "Our Constitution says that 'We, the People' are the sovereign power in the country," writes Mathews. Therefore, as citizens of a country governed by self-rule, people must be active in determining their collective destiny—an obligation that goes beyond voting for elected officials or approving or rejecting ballot initiatives.

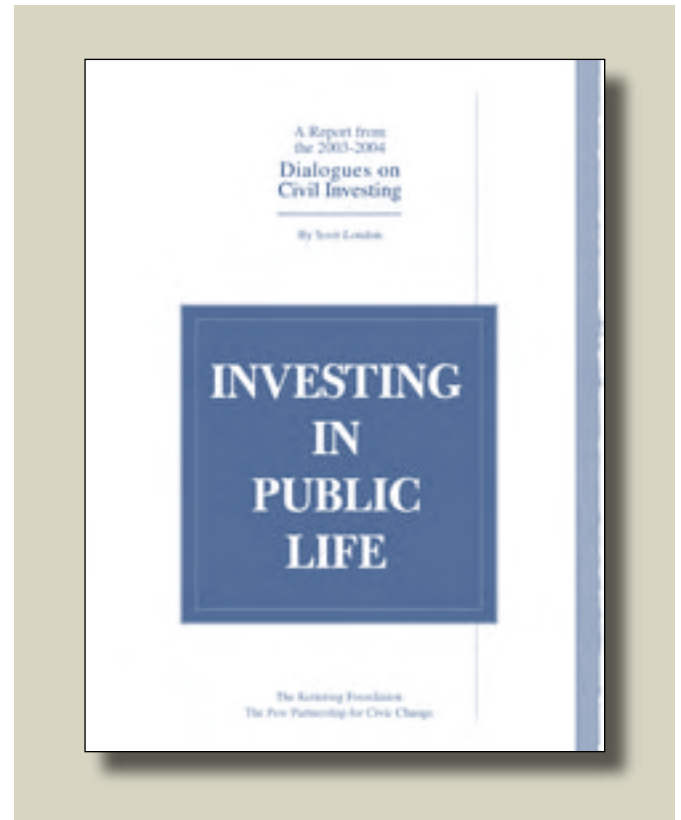
The important link that Mathews makes is that taking ownership of collective problems is essential to taking ownership of the public schools, and also of democracy. As citizens become engaged with the problems that concern them, schools will benefit. Often, addressing a community problem will help mitigate the effects of that problem on the schools. Other times, communities of citizens engaged with one another will be able to offer other kinds of educational support. Mathews reports that people and communities are much more confident about educating young people than they are about fixing the schools because they don't see education as occurring solely in the school building. In the book, he reports on a number of examples of people around the United States who have creatively used community resources to help educate children in everything from math and science to languages and the arts.

Ultimately, however, bridging the divide between citizens and schools will require acknowledging that public schools are an intrinsic part of our democracy and that *citizens* are truly the ones responsible for making democracy work as it should. What this book offers is a new way of thinking about how all of us can contribute to this process. After all, as Mathews writes, "Only a citizenry that rules itself can restore the public schools to their rightful place as democratic institutions still needed to complete the great work of our Revolution."

—Paloma Dallas

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# Philanthropy and Public Life: A Question of Civil Investing

By Scott London

*The following essay was adapted from a report sponsored by the Kettering Foundation and the Pew Partnership for Civic Change. Written by Scott London, the full report, Investing in Public Life: A Report from the 2003-2004 Dialogues on Civil Investing (2005) is available from the Kettering Foundation.*

## Foundation Executives and Civic Leaders Compare Notes on How to Build Strong and Sustainable Communities

Over the past decade, civil investing has emerged as one of the most important new developments in American philanthropy. Not quite a philosophy, not quite a grantmaking strategy, and not quite a type of grant, but something of all three, civil investing can be broadly defined as the use of philanthropic resources for building community and strengthening public life.

The theory and practice of civil investing can be traced back to a series of

The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving 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. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research corporation supported by a \$250 million endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

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