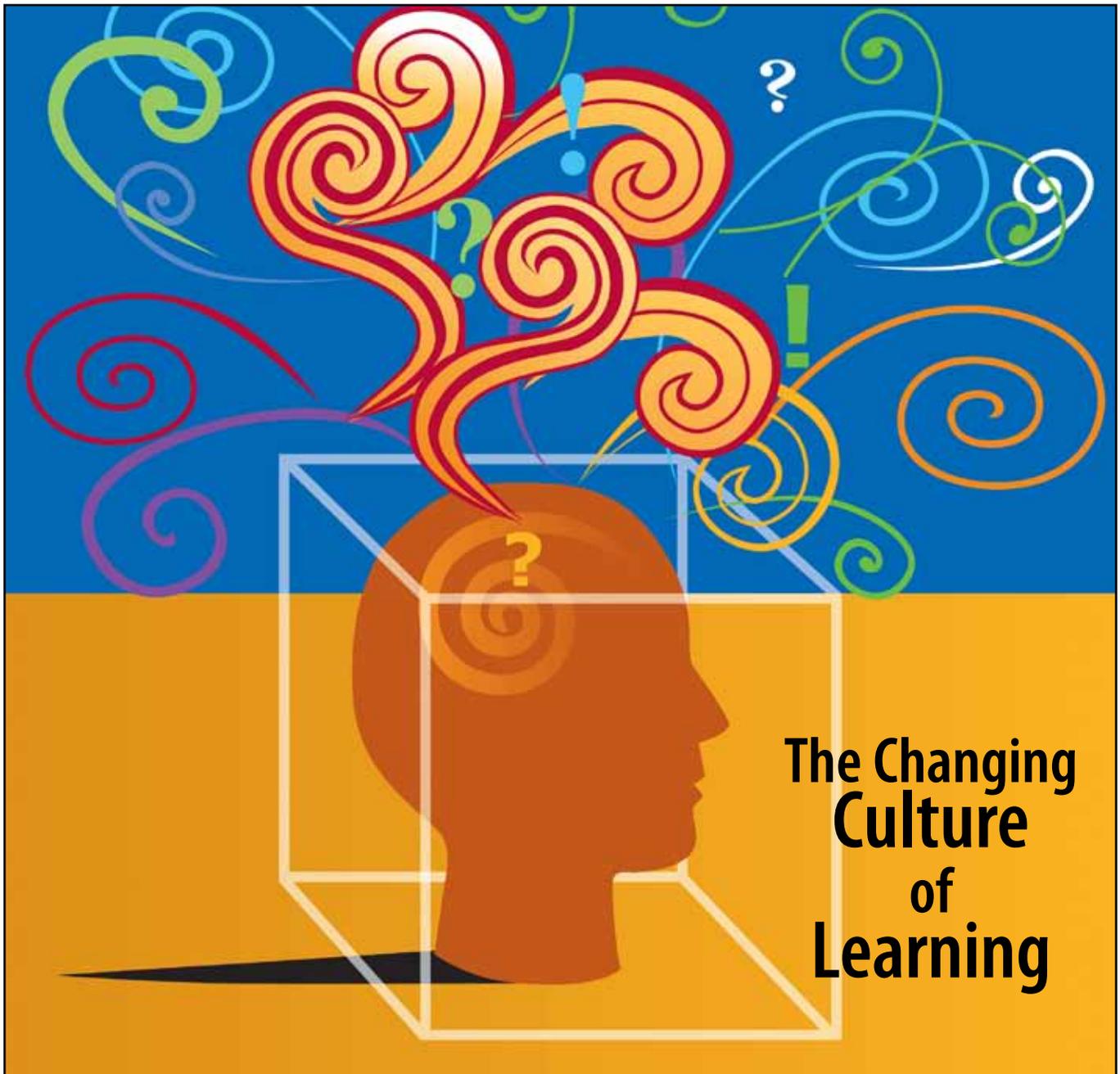


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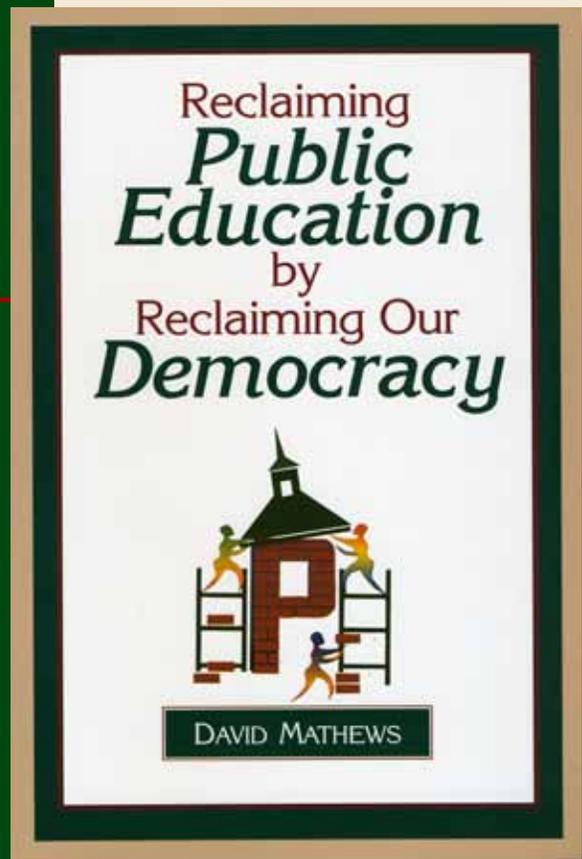
**The Changing
Culture
of
Learning**

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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Phillip Lurie

Copy Editor

Lisa Boone-Berry

Design and Production

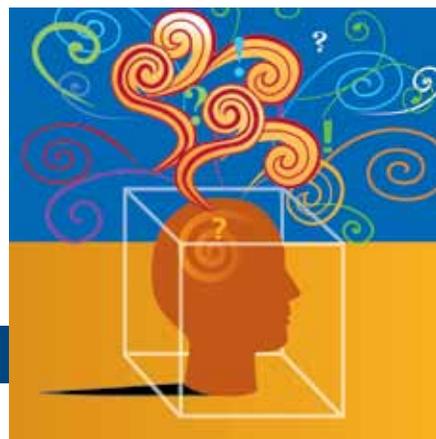
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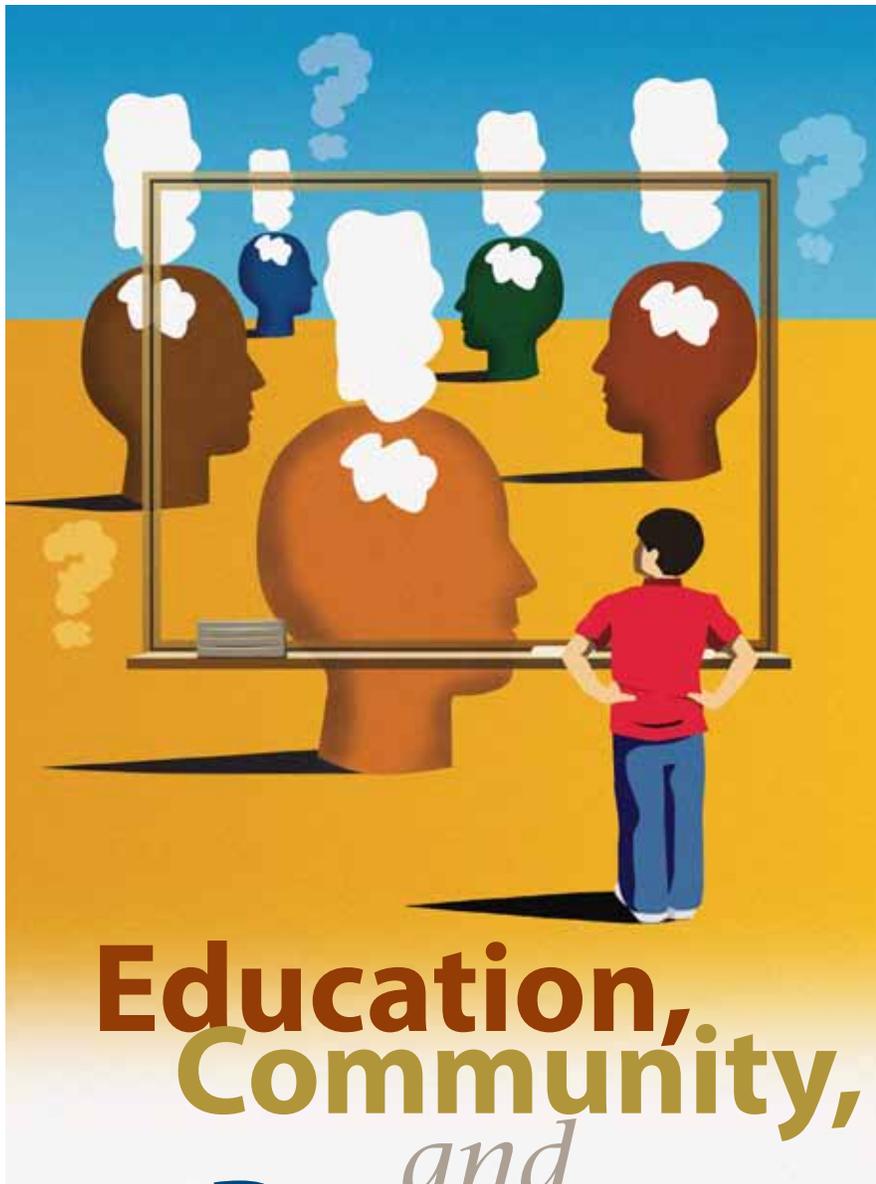
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CONTENTS



- 4 **Education, Community, and Democracy**
David Mathews
- 6 **Community as an Educational Institution**
Amy Lee
- 9 **Civic Capacity and the Community Role in Education**
Derek Barker and Alexandra Robinson
- 12 **A Diagnostic Approach to Learning-Based Change**
Randall Nielsen
- 15 **Learning Communities**
Harold Saunders
- 18 **From “That School” to “Our School” —A Community Lesson in the Power of Partnership**
Elizabeth Sherwood
- 21 **Mobile-izing Communities and Schools for Extraordinary Results**
Carolyn Akers
- 24 **Remembering the Public’s Role: Early Public Education in Alabama**
Melinda Gilmore
- 28 **Communities: A Resource—Broadening the Definition of Education**
Patricia Moore Harbour
- 31 **Creating a Culture of Learning: Neighborhood Learning Communities in St. Paul**
Lisa Boone-Berry
- 34 ***Extraordinary Results in Ordinary Communities: A Brief Review***
Phillip Lurie
- 36 **Books Worth Reading**
The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods
By John McKnight and Peter Block
- 38 **The Year in Review**
Amy Lee



Education, Community, *and* Democracy

By David Mathews

As in past issues of *Connections*, we report on one area of research that we've reviewed in depth. This year, we have been reviewing our studies of the public and public education. This introduction will provide an overview of how this research has evolved over the years. Trying to understand the role of education in a democracy has been quite a journey.

The companion publication to *Connections*, the *Kettering Review*, goes into considerable detail about the ideas and

insights that have marked our journey. This piece can't do what the *Review* does in drawing together different lines of thought into a powerful narrative. (Obviously, I hope that you will read the *Review*.) The conceptual terrain we traveled has been marked by scholars like John Dewey; Lawrence Cremin, one of our past trustees and a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian; and Edmund Gordon, professor emeritus at Columbia's Teachers College. Dewey is famous (or infamous depend-

ing on your point of view) for shifting the spotlight from schools to education and the community. Cremin, who was my major professor at Columbia, delved into American history to document the number and variety of institutions used to educate new generations—from the family and home to religious institutions and television programs. (Cremin would surely have included the Internet if he had lived to see the role it now plays in our lives.) Gordon is known for an impressive body of research over a long career, and we were particularly struck by his observation that communities themselves are educating institutions.

We don't do our research by reading books in libraries, however. We learn from the experiences that people tell us about when they try to strengthen democracy—that is, try to do things that will give citizens greater control over their future. For instance, we have benefitted recently from what we learned from citizens who aren't teachers but who use community resources to close the achievement gap, which turns out to be many gaps.

Our research began with, and still includes, a focus on the public schools. Yet, gradually, we broadened our scope to look at all forms of education, rather than one particular institution—the school. Like Cremin and Gordon, we became aware of the many institutions that educate, including communities themselves.

As our research evolved from looking at schools to seeing schools as part of a larger system of education, we found it necessary to make a distinction, which is useful if not overdrawn. The act of transmitting information from one generation to another has been called *instructing* or *teaching*. *Learning*, on the other hand, is the ability to give meaning to what is happening in our world so we can decide how we should act. (Ideally, of course, teaching strengthens the ability to learn.)

Then we asked, where does learning take place? The answer we came up with is the same as when we asked about education. Learning begins in communities. And as Gordon points out, every community influences the learning that occurs through a culture or set of expectations that either promotes learning and education or devalues it. So our lens for

research opened wider still. We were looking at schooling, education writ large, and within education, learning. And we were looking at all three in communities with a particular focus on the culture of learning. As reported in the *Review*, it was only a short—but big—step to move from seeing the educational resources in a community to seeing the community itself as an educator; that is, as a political actor capable of bringing together all of its educating institutions, which would significantly strengthen the hand of citizens.

We always ask ourselves about the practical application of what we are finding in the research. So if communities have the power to educate, and they exercise that power through a culture that promotes learning, what would such a culture look like in everyday life? The answer was clear, and we had seen it in practice: everybody in the community would be expected to do something that would enrich what young people were learning. As was said in one city, everybody is trying to educate our kids. We knew of several communities that were doing just that—getting everyone involved in education. St. Louis Park, Minnesota, and Albion, Michigan, come to mind. We also had cases of communities where people without much formal education themselves had made useful contributions. And we had seen numerous examples of using community resources to educate, including horse farms, fish tanks, and newspapers. (For more on using local resources, see Jack Shelton's *Consequential Learning*.) But would these projects change the culture?

At this point, we hit a major obstacle, a rock in the road you might say. Our research is about *democratic* practices, things citizens can do. And changing a culture is a tall order. Cultures form over long periods of time, and they are almost impossible to change, certainly not through quick fixes. Changing a culture requires persistence. One or two community projects won't do the job. As we struggled with this issue, we recalled that keeping up the political momentum to complete work citizens are doing is more likely to occur if people are learning along the way. When that is happening, citizens profit from things that go wrong. They

learn from their mistakes and press ahead. Communities intent on projects succeeding, on the other hand, often have trouble keeping up their momentum. If their projects succeed, they are satisfied and quit working, which isn't a good idea when dealing with persistent problems. And if their projects fail, they get discouraged and also quit. So whether they succeed or fail doesn't make much difference. Learning communities are different. If a project succeeds, they want to improve on what they have accomplished. They move on to a new project. If they fail, they learn from mistakes. They fail successfully.

Although cultures of learning are slow to evolve, communities can become better at learning. That is, the way they go about learning can change. One way to do that is to change how they assess civic projects. Conventional evaluations can inhibit learning, particularly if communities rely on outside experts to tell them what worked and what didn't. Certainly, perspectives from outside a community can be helpful, but citizens have to assess their progress themselves in order to learn. It's fine to see what others are doing, but for learning communities, imitation is limitation. The search of looking for best practices can also inhibit learning and promote imitation.

Ironically, accountability efforts, like evaluations, can be another impediment to community learning. Accountability is usually judged by setting fixed goals and measuring progress against it. Yet communities learn more when they assess both goals and the progress they have made. Sometimes the most important lesson learned is that the goals were incomplete or just wrong. To make matters worse, the institution being held accountable may not be the only one that is responsible. In education, schools are usually the ones held accountable, and they should be. But they aren't the only ones responsible. If communities can educate, they are also

accountable. And citizens are aware that, ultimately, they are accountable for what happens to young people. A report on the accountability movement being done with Dan Yankelovich and Jean Johnson of Public Agenda will be available before year's end. Preliminary results show a considerable gap between what institutions consider being accountable and what citizens want from accountability standards, which they have little voice in setting.

The bottom line: unless a community is learning itself as it tries to enrich the learning of young people, the community is unlikely to keep up the initiative it takes to change its culture.

Where do we go next in our journey?

It was only a short—but big—step to move from seeing the educational resources in a community to seeing the community itself as an educator; that is, as a political actor capable of bringing together all of its educating institutions, which would significantly strengthen the hand of citizens.

The proposition that a community learns is admittedly problematic and demands more attention. People learn. Maybe companies and teams learn. But communities? And if they learn, how? Does everyone learn the same thing together? Not likely. And how much learning has to occur before a culture changes? Or to be more practical, what creates the expectation that everyone will try to teach the kids? Can everyone teach, even those with little formal education? And, how will schools react to everyone teaching? Will they feel reinforced or usurped? Please join us in responding to these questions or in posing others.

David Mathews is president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at mathews@kettering.org.

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