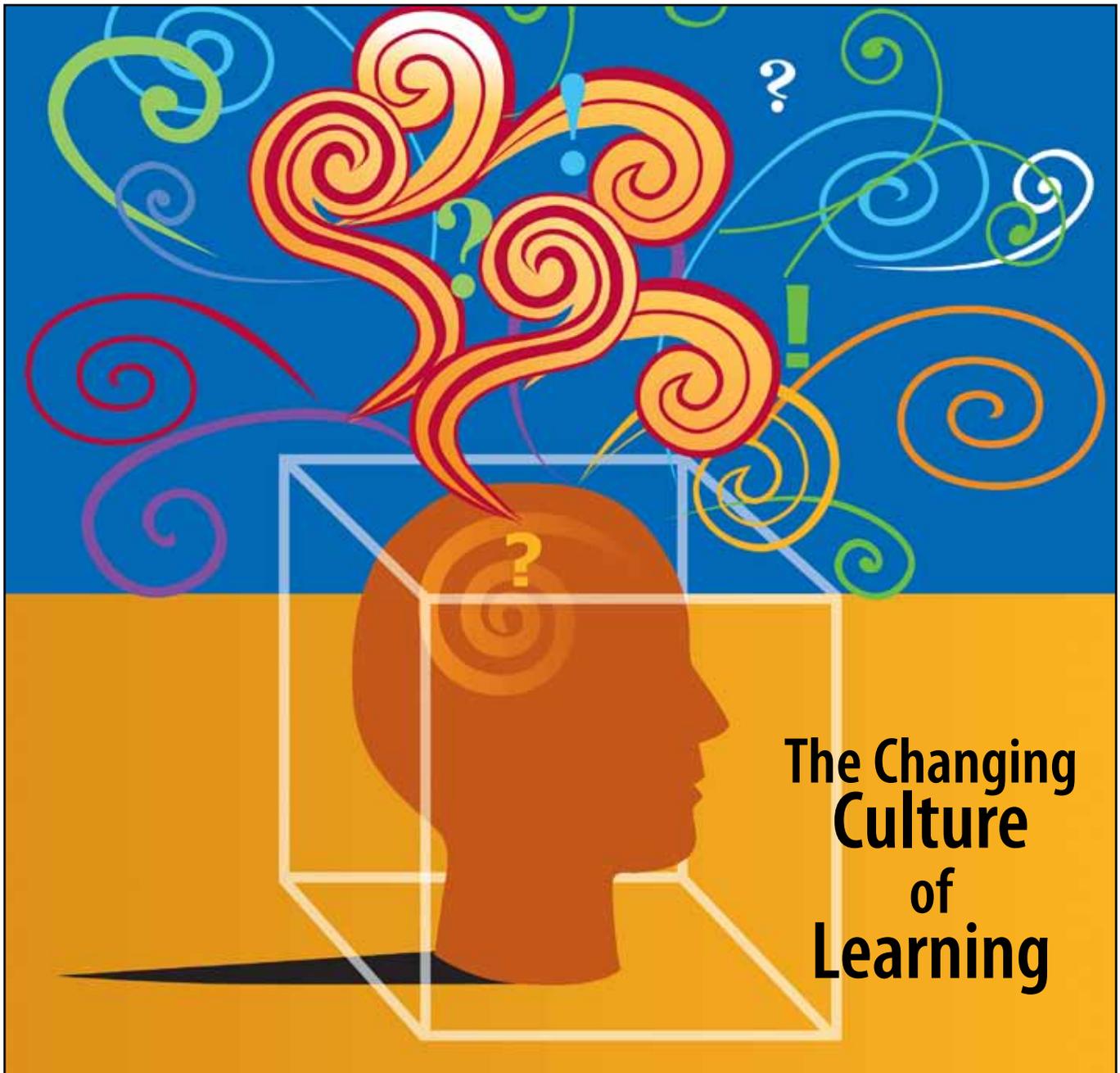


THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

# CONNECTIONS

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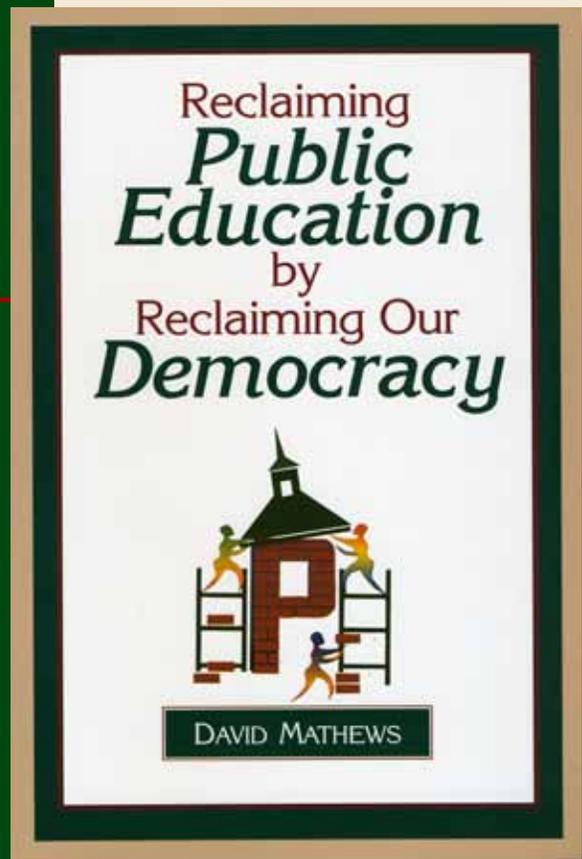
**The Changing  
Culture  
of  
Learning**

# 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 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](http://www.kettering.org).

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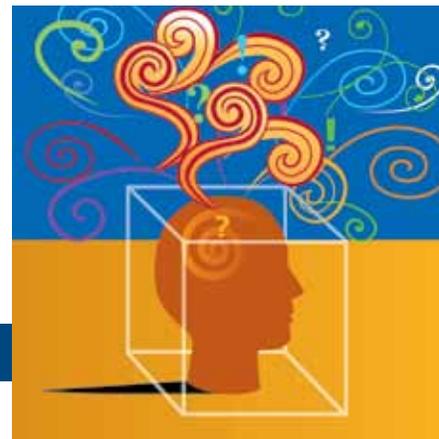
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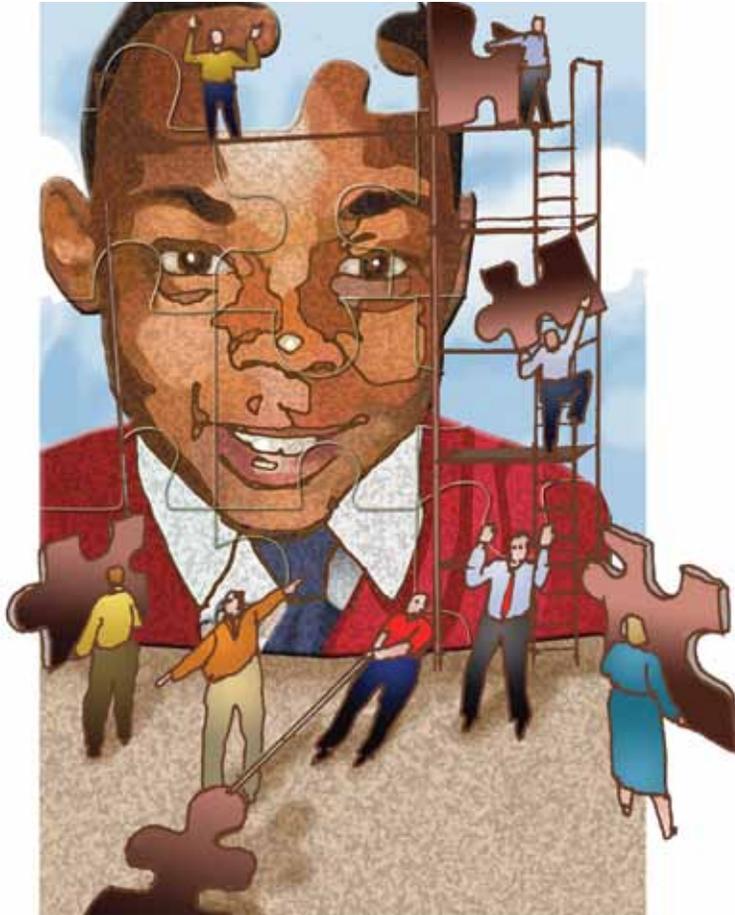
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# CONNECTIONS

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# Community *as an* Educational Institution

By Amy Lee

**“**If you think about the history of school and the history of education in the United States, when we first organized public schools, they were pretty much limited to reading, writing, and counting,” explains Edmund Gordon.<sup>1</sup> “We’ve added a lot of other things, but I think it was Ben Franklin who has a little essay on education and he talks about school as where one goes to learn these instrumentalities, but it is to life that we turn to learn about living and just about everything else.”

At age 90, Gordon is director of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, in addition to several other positions. His career in education spans over half a century and he has contributed to nearly all of the most important initiatives in education in that period: desegregation of schools, Head Start, and complementary/supplementary education. His work has expanded upon and deepened ideas and themes first written about by John Dewey and Lawrence Cremin, two other educational thinkers whose writings on the subject have greatly influenced Kettering Foundation research. He shared his insights in an interview with Kettering program officer Amy Lee, excerpted below.

*“I stand with Dewey and Cremin and a few others of us who are arguing that we have misunderstood education when we have equated it with schooling. I contend that schooling is not coterminous with education, that is, schooling is a piece of education, education is far broader. When I first started talking about supplementary education, a woman challenged my use of the term; she said, ‘You’re talking about a supplement to schooling, but maybe you ought to be talking about schooling as supplementary to life, because there’s so much more out there to be learned and people learn so much more in life than the stuff we learn in school.”*

*“In fact, school has moved more and more toward trying to be inclusive of all of the things that people have to learn, and of course, she was arguing that it never could be so inclusive, and I would say is probably not the most effective place to learn most of what it is people need to know in order to live effective lives. That is not to argue that those things that have been rarefied for teaching and learning in school are not important, they’re terribly important, and I think improvement of schools and distribution of high-quality education—I’m all for all of those, and don’t want to detract from them at all. But we*

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## Community as an Educational Institution

*can't stop there, there's all this other stuff that has to happen if we really want to educate our children."*

Gordon said he thinks it's correct to depend upon schools to teach the basic skills of complex communication, reasoning with numbers, using words to communicate, and using words and the symbolic relationships between things to solve problems. *"But there are other ways to solve problems. Most of us don't have much opportunity to visit farms now, but if you go out to the farm, at least before they became so modernized, people were solving all kinds of practical problems of farming, of manufacture, with relatively little mastery of the academic stuff. They were still learning how to reason, learning how to apply logic to things, even learning something about numeric relationships, without such formal instruction.*

*"Some years ago I was meeting with a group of middle-class parents in a suburb of New York City, and they felt that having moved to the suburbs, having sought to place their kids in good schools, and insisting that they go, was the end of their responsibility, that they paid taxes that were high enough for the school to take on that responsibility. But if you look carefully at what most affluent and educationally sophisticated parents do, these are families that invest heavily in out-of-school learning, whether it's taking trips or going to the museum or going to the library, talking with kids at home, giving kids responsibilities, all kinds of non-deliberately educational experiences which are opportunities to learn for these kids. And we know from the research of people like Jane Mercer and Dick Wolf that these informal supports for academic learning make a difference in the achievement of kids.*

*"The ways in which out-of-school experiences support the mastery of academic subject matter, and I think possibly more important, the ways in which they support the development of a sense of agency, a sense that 'I can do something about this' in children, [are] tremendously important."*

In the course of trying to discover more settings where children could learn, some of Gordon's colleagues and students fanned out through the community of Harlem, interviewing community members to find out where they went to learn different things. *"And there were places people went to learn language other than school, there were places where people went to learn to shoot craps, not in school. There were places that they went to to learn about belief in God, not in school, not in church. One chap was talking about how he really came to understand society when he became involved in politics. Education has to do with discovery—that learning of the culture, the meanings assigned, the rarefied techniques that have come out of the life experiences of people. They seem to be just as important for human adaptation as these things that we have singled out in school to teach."*

In this vein Gordon's and Kettering's interests overlap. In the 2008 edition of *Connections*, Connie Crockett reported some early research on a similar theme: "educators within communities."

*Georgetown, Kentucky, has retired racehorses needing attention and care that have inspired responsibility from formerly withdrawn kids. Another local resource for educating is the bluegrass music found everywhere. Having learned to fiddle by being surrounded by fiddlers, 18-year-old Chloe Roberts organized a bluegrass camp for kids in a distant corner of the state. She says "The elders teach us that there is life beyond school, that there is a community to belong to..." In north Lexington, [the health department] got young people hacking away at the 10-foot weeds around an old cemetery. They found the gravesites of native African poets and Kentucky Derby winners, researched those names, and*

*got the (now pristine) site on the National Register of Historic Places. [St. Louis Park] adopted a community covenant to put children first... The "Children First" premise changed how [a longtime school cook] reacted when she noticed a harried young girl who had missed lunch. "Slow down, honey, I'll fix you something to eat," she told the youngster. Her kind attitude prompted tears and a hug from the child, who confided that she had never before been called "honey." The cook's caring attitude may have made a significant difference in that child's academic life.<sup>2</sup>*

In these communities, Kettering Foundation observed both individual citizens and citizens working together, taking the resources they have and teaching children

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**Education has to do with discovery—that learning of the culture, the meanings assigned, the rarefied techniques that have come out of the life experiences of people. They seem to be just as important for human adaptation as these things that we have singled out in school to teach.**

what the community believes they need to know. Some of what these educators taught directly supported academic instruction (basic math concepts slipped into the care and feeding of horses; a supplemental history lesson conveyed in cleaning up the cemetery) but some of it is that other kind of learning that Gordon mentioned, which often isn't done in school: the learning that one can have some influence over one's future, the acquisition of a sense of agency.

Somehow, all these citizens came to see education as something they could be

actors in. Sometimes they were prompted by a group, a community leader, or a crisis. Sometimes the realization has even been a result of participating in a widespread community conversation, like the kind the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF) held repeatedly in its decades-long work to improve education in Mobile, Alabama. Because of that widespread community engagement, MAEF has in fact been able to have an impact directly within schools, but a big part of Mobile's improvement also happened outside its schoolrooms. MAEF worked with "whoever needed to be in the room to get what we needed done," as its founder Carolyn Akers put it. Basically, MAEF identified and engaged crucial actors and resources in the community: churches who gave low-income kids backpacks with school supplies and clothes; Big Brothers and Sisters, who joined in a mentoring program, and students themselves, who take an active, voting role in the planning of all MAEF activities.

Over the course of several decades, MAEF was able to effectively turn the community of Mobile into an educational institution. Thanks to dogged effort by Akers and the rest of MAEF's (actually quite small) staff, every citizen, business, and organization in Mobile is actively engaged in the process of improving education, from deciding what that improvement should be to implementing the actions to make it happen. Rather than being simply a community with some individuals trying to support the primary educator, the school system, the community of Mobile itself puts education on all its members' agenda, constantly searches out resources that could be educational assets and encourages networking of such assets to maximize impact.

And this idea, of the community as an educational institution, brings us full-circle—back to Gordon.

*"I've been arguing recently that families and communities carry a responsibility equal to or at least parallel to the*

*responsibility of schools. And I'm sometimes asked, what are communities to do, how can communities do something? The New York Urban League and the National Urban League and I have been talking for the last six months about a model that we have developed here in Rockland County [New York]. It's called a Comprehensive Education Resource Center. It's really modeled after the old Settlement houses that developed at the turn of the 20th century, when we had millions of immigrants coming into this country who needed to be socialized, or acculturated, to life in the United States. The notion of a comprehensive resource center is a facility that should be available in communities to families that do not yet appreciate or understand the kind of things that need to happen outside of school in order to make schooling work, or, I like to address it more broadly, the kinds of things that need to happen in the lives of children if intellectual competence is the end. And these resource centers have the responsibility for what I call the social marketing of the idea that education does not end at the school bell, the idea that parents and other interested adults not only can but should play an active role. They will make available resources to those parents that they can use, they will teach parents how to do it. I like to make reference to a very successful black neurosurgeon whose grandmother used to supervise his homework. Ben Carson reports in his biography that he was going into middle school when he realized that this grandmother who had supervised his homework and his reading was herself illiterate. But she knew that she needed to hold him responsible for what he was doing and he needed to be accountable so she would sit him down and he would explain what his schoolwork was about; he would not only read to her, but he would explain what he had read. Not herself an educated person, but knowing that involvement in the supervision of the education of this youngster was*

*important. So that we don't necessarily have to be highly educated ourselves to support the educational and personal development of other people."*

What has been done in Mobile, Alabama, and Kentucky and other places has been just that: regular people, regardless of their personal education level, coming to recognize that they can help children learn. These have been grass-roots, almost purely experimental, efforts. So it is interesting to see what has been developing organically in communities that Kettering is studying being advocated by one of the most learned and prestigious minds in education.

*"The model that we're using here in Rockland County is attached to the local community college," said Gordon. "The model that we're trying to develop in Manhattan, Harlem, and Brooklyn will be attached to public schools, using the school facility, but independent of the school, because one of the things we're trying to help parents understand is that they have the right and the responsibility to hold the school accountable for what it does. One of the reasons we've gone to the local community college here, and to the Urban League in New York, is these are institutions that already exist. It will certainly help if we can get federal grants or state grants to support it, but my impression is most communities already have some of these resources, and what we need to do is begin to coordinate them, bring them to people's attention, but most important is to generate a community commitment to the function."*

Amy Lee is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at [alee@kettering.org](mailto:alee@kettering.org).

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Gordon, personal interview with author, January 28, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Connie Crockett, "Communities as Educators: A Report on the November 2007 Public and Public Education Workshop," *Connections* (2008).

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