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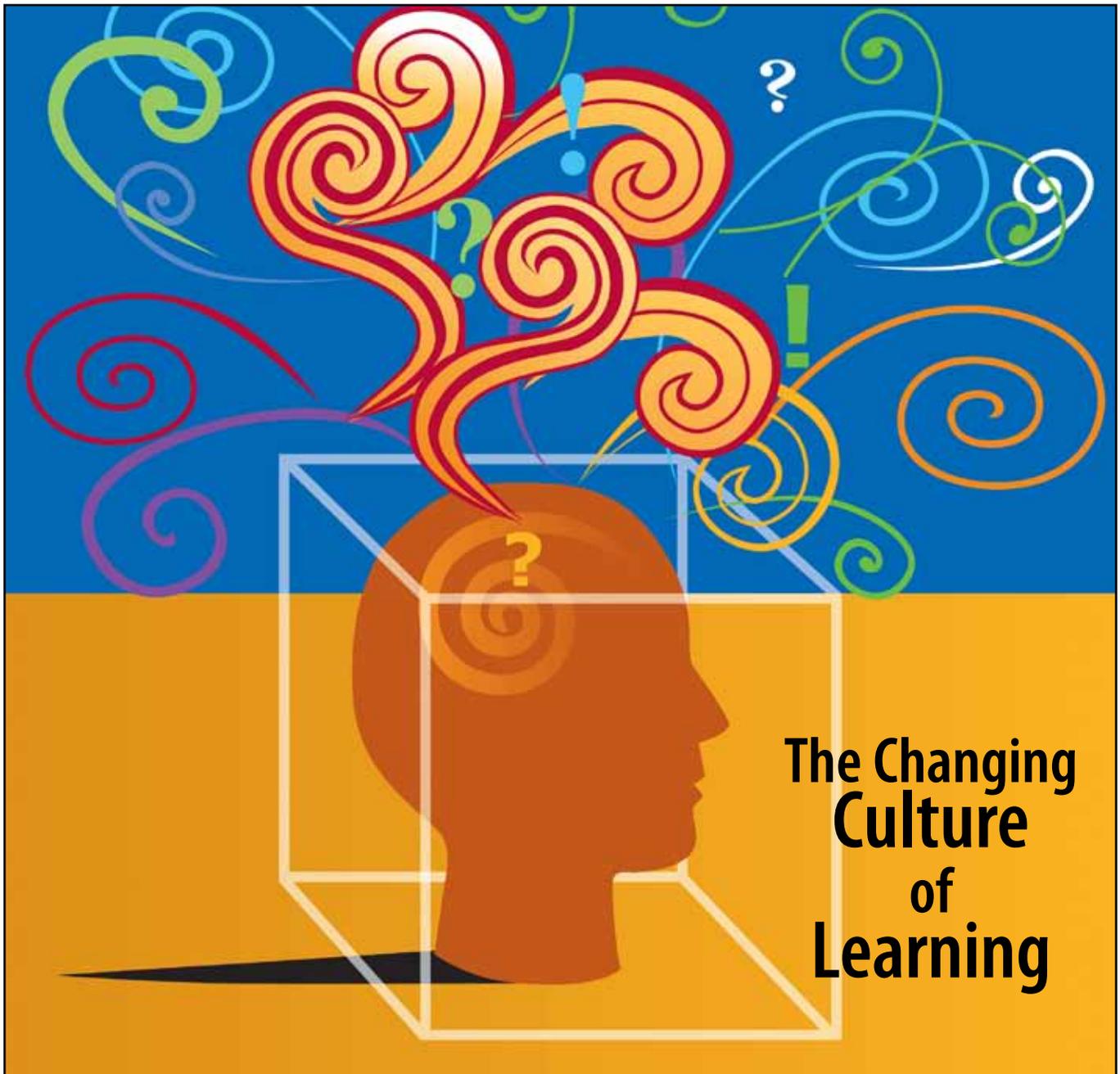
The Changing
Culture
of
Learning

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.
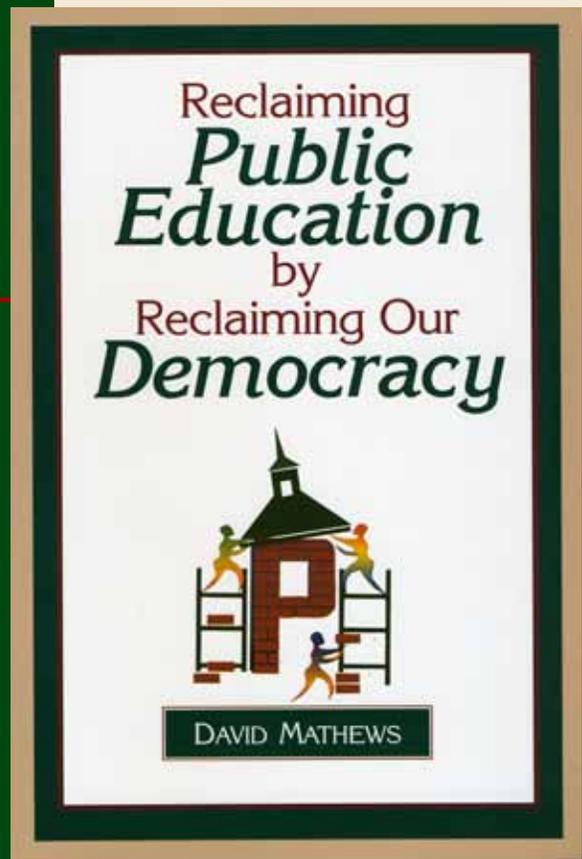
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Civic Capacity
and the Community Role in Education

By Derek Barker and Alexandra Robinson

Throughout the Kettering Foundation's research on experiments to strengthen democracy, a central recurring theme is the importance of civic capacity, the *political* characteristics that allow communities to come together across their differences to face their challenges. Communities need robust and efficient institutional systems to implement policies, but civic capacity determines the underlying processes they use

to reach decisions and take actions. What might this concept mean for the community task of educating our youth? With our focus on education and learning during the past year, we have realized the need to continue and strengthen our research on the critical role of informal actors—parent groups, youth development organizations, religious institutions—in the critical task of education. Although schools may

> "The important fact is that family life does educate, religious life does educate, and work does educate; and, what is more, the education of all three realms is as intentional as the education of the school, though in different ways and in different measures."

be the most visible sites for the education of youth, the concept of civic capacity suggests that education is a task for the community as a whole.

Civic capacities are distinct from, and complementary to, the technical capacities of political systems. Ideally, a community will be strong in both its civic and technical dimensions. Technical capacities, however, are apolitical in nature. That is, they have little direct effect on the political work of bringing diverse groups together to make difficult choices and act collectively. The most visible attempts to address education emphasize technical solutions, such as formal schooling, standardized testing, and policy reforms like charter schools or vouchers. Implicit in this discourse is a framing of public education that revolves around schools, and with that framing a specific set of educational actors are implicated—namely professional teachers and administrators. Parents and youth then are viewed as consumers rather than producers of education. Education experts, including former advocates of policy fixes, have begun to realize that

these reforms only scratch the surface of the complex problems facing our young people and seem to be searching for a different approach.[1]

The concept of civic capacity offers the promise of a more holistic way to address the problem of education. Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize-winning work is showing that citizens and community actors can play a key role in the "coproduction" of public goods, while John McKnight argues that communities—even the most economically distressed—have key assets that they can themselves bring to bear on the problems that concern them. Applying these insights to the problem of education reveals a counternarrative to the predominant discourse on public education, placing the focus of analysis on the community. Instead of the contemporary education policy literature, we have returned to an earlier generation of education theorists for insight into the community role in education. Although John Dewey saw schools as the primary location of reform efforts, he raised the possibility that schooling might be part of a larger educational system. Lawrence Cremin built on Dewey's insight, but argued more forcefully for an expansive renewal of the civic sphere and its educative functions. As Cremin wrote, "The important fact is that family life does educate, religious life does educate, and work does educate; and, what is more, the education of all three realms is as intentional as the education of the school, though in different ways and in different measures." This is not to say the schools are not seen as important actors in the sphere of public education, but that they are one of many educative actors in a community. Previous phases of Kettering Foundation research have attempted to bring civic capacity theory and the legacy of Dewey and Cremin to contemporary education debates. *Reclaiming Public Edu-*

cation by Reclaiming Our Democracy, for example, moves the debate on education reform beyond schools and government policy to a much broader but more difficult renewal of civic life as a whole.[2]

From this perspective, myriad community entities offer learning opportunities for young people: the family and its social networks; libraries and museums; summer camps, parks, 4-H clubs, and community gardens. Although the educative aspects of these entities are often taken for granted and labeled as "recreational," they constitute a unique and ever-changing community that educates each child. The organizations and networks that make up this educative world in turn offer opportunities for professionals and citizens alike to be involved in the community task of education. A civic approach to education is therefore not only more holistic, but also more democratic than a narrow focus on formal education within bureaucratic systems. *Why Public Schools? Whose Public Schools? What Early Communities Have to Tell Us*, a case study of education in early communities in Alabama, provides historical precedent for, and concrete examples of, a civic capacity approach to education.[3] In these historical examples, civic groups have taken up educational challenges that now tend to be seen as the function of schools.

Recent initiatives by the Kettering Foundation and its research partners have attempted to see how a civic capacity approach to education might resonate with citizens' actual experiences. These experiments confirm that citizens, like Cremin, see the challenge of educational inequality in larger terms than school reform. In one project, captured in the documentary film *No Textbook Answer*, the foundation worked with community organizations across the country to hold deliberative forums on the issue of the academic achievement gap.[4] In the forums, dangerous neighborhoods riddled with drugs and crime, a lack of positive adult mentorship, absent or overwhelmed parents, and too few character-building extracurricular activities were all identified as contributing to the widening gap between students' educational success. This research supports the central tenet of a civic capacity approach to education—

Education as Community Task and School-Based Task

	Education as Community Task	Education as School-Based
Locus of education	The community: both formal and informal educative spaces, across time and space	The school: institutional, formal, and structured educative spaces, bounded time and space
Role of citizens	To make collective decisions, coproducer of education	Consumer of education, potentially (un)supportive of the institution (e.g. school)
Knowledge production	Knowledge is coproduced in interactions between and among actors	Knowledge is transferred
Public engagement	Interaction between actors around a matter of public education, the public engages educational institutions	Communication to public by institution around a matter of public education, the institution (e.g. school) engages the public
Accountability	Relational, shared or collective responsibility for educative outcomes	Providing standardized data to measure outcomes
Reform strategy	Incrementally strengthen the community as a whole; experiments in informal sector	Policy fixes (charter schools, standardized testing, teacher training)

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that education implicates a range of complex social and political problems.

Cremin's insight, that the educative entities of communities need to play a central role in reform, suggests that the civic sphere offers opportunities for experiments in education that are just as intentional as experiments in schools. During the past year, several recent and ongoing initiatives have focused on the practical implications of a civic capacity framework for the community role in education. A series of workshops with community educators has been identifying various people involved in the education of a community's youth outside of the formal or professional realm of education. This work is showing that young people often form their most influential bonds with adults outside of school.

The above table provides some concepts for distinguishing between reform strategies that see education as a community task and education as school-based.

For further reading on civic capacity, coproduction, and community assets, see:

Xavier de Souza Briggs, *Democracy as Problem Solving: Civic Capacity in Communities across the Globe* (Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2008).

Elinor Ostrom, *Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Development* (Global, Area, and Internation Archive, UC Berkeley, 1997).

John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Evanston, IL: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, 1997).

Key works by John Dewey and Lawrence Cremin include:

John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944; reprint, 1966).

Lawrence Cremin, "Public Education and the Education of the Public," *Teachers College Record*, Volume 77, Number 1, 1-12.

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[1]Diane Ravitch, "The Myth of Charter Schools," *New York Review of Books*, November 11, 2010, accessed online at http://tinyurl.com/38y28nc.

[2] David Mathews, *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2006).

[3] David Mathews, *Why Public Schools? Whose Public Schools? What Early Communities Have to Tell Us* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2003).

[4] For information on the initiative, see http://www.kettering.org/achievementgap.

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