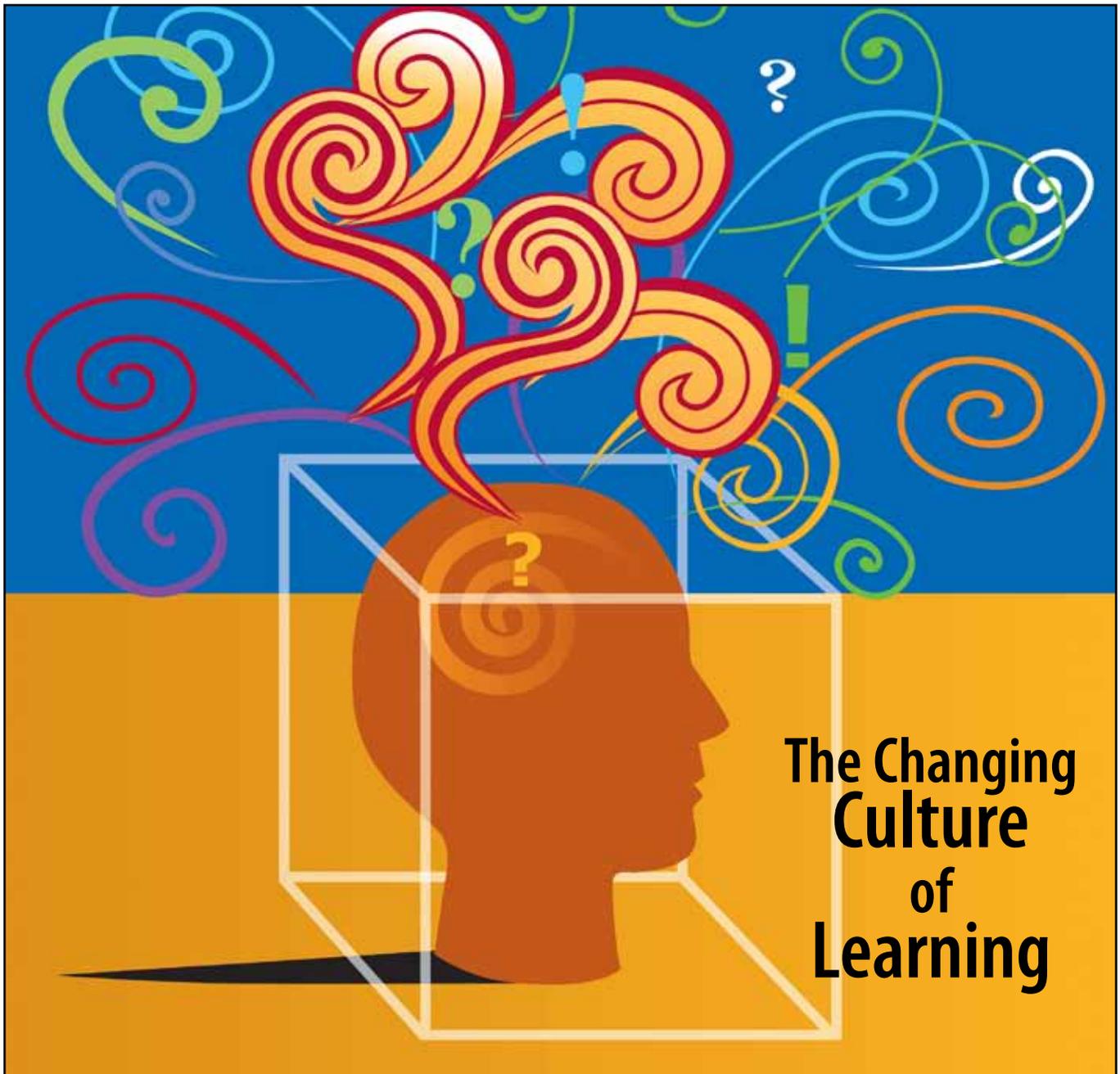


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CONNECTIONS

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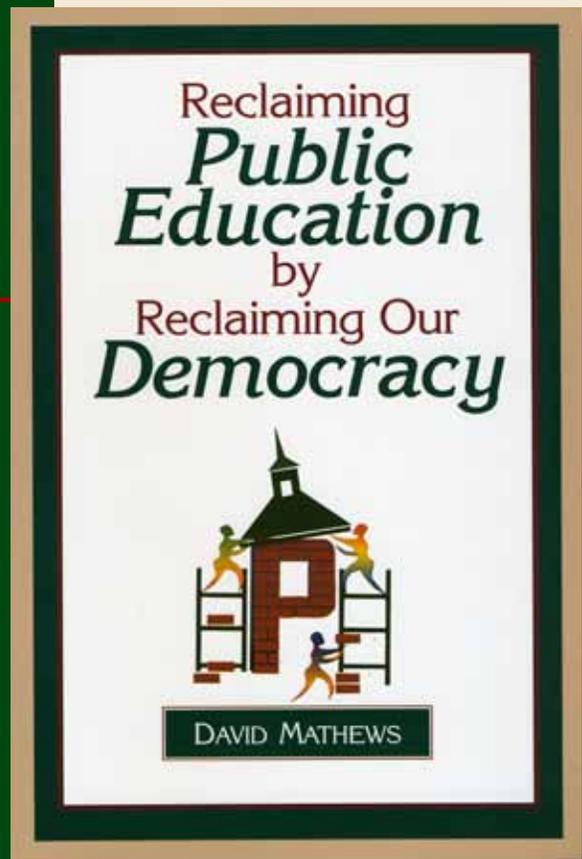
**The Changing
Culture
of
Learning**

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.

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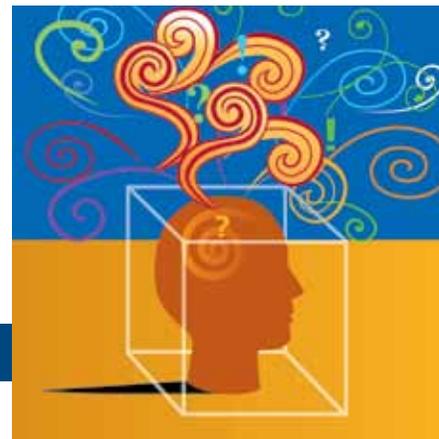
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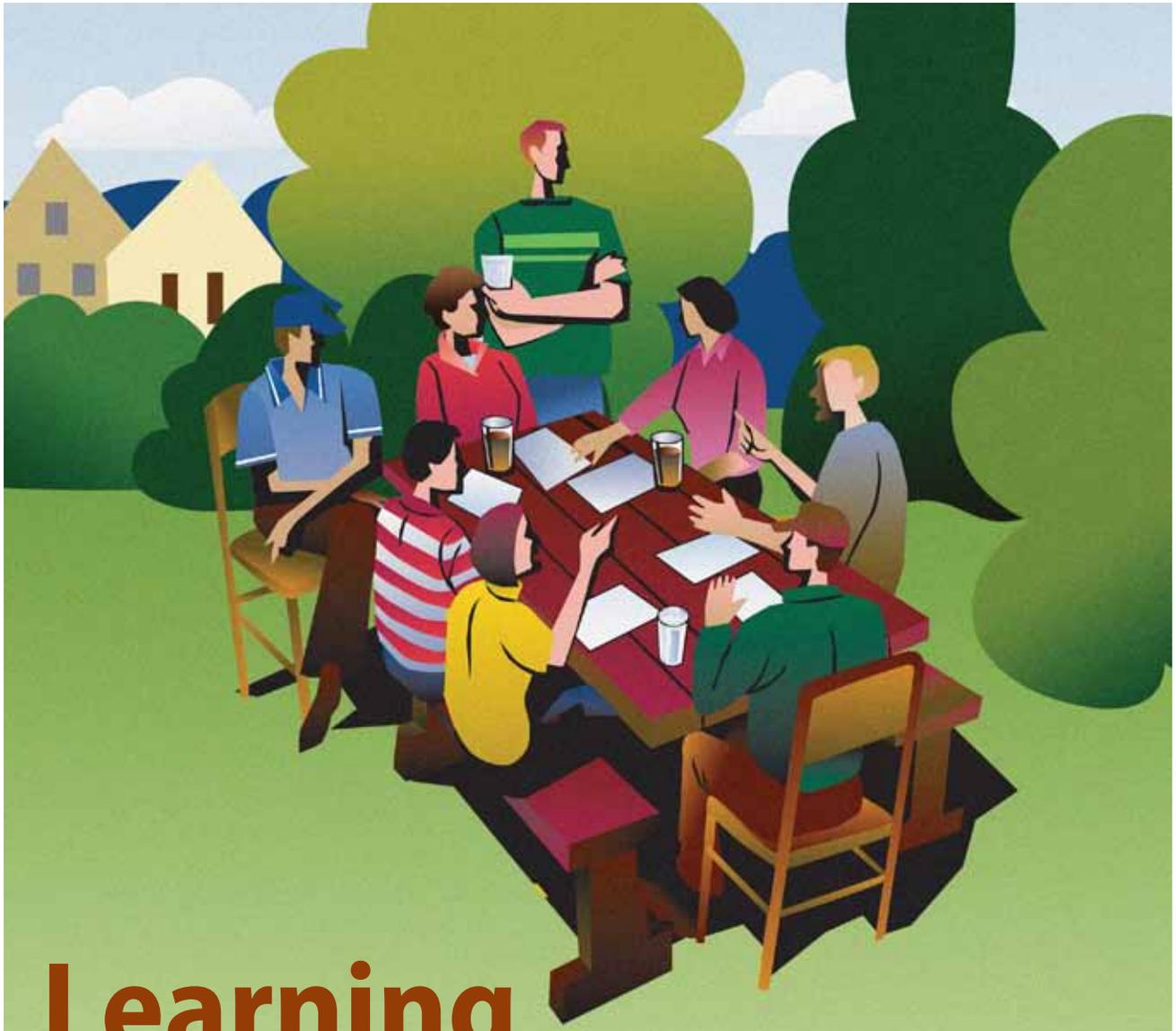
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Learning Communities

By Harold Saunders

Communities learn as citizens interact around opportunities and problems that they together identify as affecting individual and collective interests. Citizens learn together in relationship. The key to relationship is some form of dialogue.

Dialogue is listening carefully and deeply enough to others to be changed by what one hears—being open to learn from others. Dialogue when sustained systematically becomes a change process for transforming relationships that block learning.

The following scenario is a generic picture of the learning process citizens go through in tackling a common problem. As citizens learn, communities learn.

To begin, a key to learning in community is creating informal spaces where citizens together can discover their capacities as political actors—ways in which they can engage a particular problem. We might call this a change in mind-set.

To quote William James, late 19th-century American psychologist and philosopher: “The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can

change their lives by modifying their mental attitudes.” Whether citizens see themselves as responsible for solving their problems and able to generate change—or choose to leave solutions to others, especially government—is critical.

That change in mind-set normally takes place as citizens talk with each other about a problem they see as hurting their interests. In every community every day in countless places, people talk about problems that affect them. Kettering president David Mathews often calls these conversations “the political wetlands.”

In some communities, we can identify spaces where people actually gather regularly to talk—a particular coffee shop, bar,

In every community every day in countless places, people talk about problems that affect them. Kettering president David Mathews often calls these conversations “the political wetlands.”

pub, church hospitality hour, or civic club. Or the space may be more free-wheeling and organic than place-based. The subjects are thrown up by a news story, by a “hot” issue being grappled with on the national stage, by a crime or a disturbing local event. Or it may come from one person’s reflections on a trend he or she feels concerned about. Whatever the trigger, the talk pervades daily life. Then, sometimes the talk begins to crystallize around a problem that arouses broad concern.

One may think of this, in effect, as exploratory dialogue. It can produce three products:

First, a judgment that action is needed. One citizen may talk with another in the neighborhood, at the coffee shop, around the water cooler in the

workplace, or at a social gathering about a problem that affects her or him. They begin to name the problem in human—not expert—terms that permit them to see their interests reflected. They may decide to meet informally without yet knowing what specific action might be possible. They ask who else needs to be at the meeting to throw light on all sides of the problem.

Second, citizens’ decision to act. The turning point from recognition of a problem that is hurting people to a decision that something must be done and then to a decision that they themselves can and must act seems to lie in citizens’ *discovery of something they personally can do* that they believe can make a difference and in their belief that others are likely to join them in such action. They make it their own problem. This exploratory space also provides a venue to begin acquiring skills of collective work and testing others’ willingness and capacity for such work.

Third, selection of an instrument for change. Together or with a catalyst organization, citizens decide to use a particular instrument for change—the “something” they can do. They must choose an instrument suited both to their capacities and to the nature of the problem they have named. Is the problem primarily a technical issue of how best to achieve a practical objective? Or are people deeply divided by what they most value or by moral disagreement over what should be done? Or are there deep underlying relational differences that prevent the people affected from working together?

Because citizens will need to work with others to discover what they can do to influence change, the practical challenge is to make those spaces places where citizens can transform unproductive or destructive relationships into the relationships necessary for them to learn and act together. Politics is about rela-

tionship. These must be spaces in which citizens can learn to relate to others who are different and whom they may disdain, dislike, fear, or even hate.

A small group of citizens together may have the capacity to initiate and organize change on their own. But often they may turn to citizens’ organizations that have developed a particular instrument for generating change to learn whether it is consistent with their purposes. Such an instrument may be the catalyst that precipitates the citizens’ decision that there is something they can do. What is important is that the citizens make the decision. A citizens’ organization may act as a catalyst by introducing a change process, training citizens to use it, and helping those citizens connect with others sharing their objective, but the citizens must control.

This may be a moment to cite for illustrative purposes two examples of commonly chosen instruments with which Kettering has worked and the differences between them:

Deliberation is a way of examining all sides of a problem and pros and cons of options for approaching that problem—including moral issues raised about which there may be profound disagreement—so as to make choices.

Sustained Dialogue differs from most other change processes in two ways: (1) It focuses on the dynamics of relationship as a cause of difference over issues rather than primarily on issues in technical terms. It heeds Einstein’s warning: “Genuine solutions to problems rarely emerge from the thinking that caused them.” (2) Because relationships are not changed easily or quickly, Sustained Dialogue works from a carefully defined concept of relationship through a progression of five stages over time.

Citizens will add and compare other instruments with which they are familiar.

Once citizens have chosen a suitable instrument that they believe is within their capacities and consistent with their purpose, they must then prepare themselves to use it. They may well want to

Learning Communities

form an organizing committee. The catalyst organization may provide training.

When they have also accomplished other necessary tasks—funding, a meeting place, assignment of tasks such as convening, inviting, recording, moderating—they set a time and place to begin and invite participants. Inviting often requires one-on-one meetings to talk more broadly about the problem, to explain the process and the time commitment it will require, and to assess a potential invitee's capacity to participate constructively.

Next, citizens create a formal space specifically designed for their change instrument.

As this wider circle meets, they work their way through a progression of tasks: (a) They broaden and deepen their diagnosis of the problem through dialogue among a broader range of citizens—a microcosm of the community affected. (b) Depending on the nature of the problem and the relationships of those involved, they may need to spend

considerable time probing and beginning to transform their own relationships, which may be causes of the problem. (c) They develop their analysis of the problem, probe its dynamics, begin to talk about possible approaches to dealing with it, and may come to some common sense of direction in which they might explore moving. This is the beginning of a strategy—the link between analysis and action. (d) They may design a complex of interactive steps that could begin to move in the desired direction and draw an ever-widening circle of citizens into engaging the problem, at least in complementary action.

In this space, as they work their way through these tasks together, they learn to create a cumulative agenda; to talk analytically and empathetically; to relate differently by thinking together rather than confronting; to create a common body of knowledge. They develop capacities to become boundary-spanners in communities—both practical skills as agenda-setters, speakers, and analyzers and

relational skills in bridging deep human divides. These are the capacities they need as political actors.

As citizens implement an action plan in broadening circles, they constantly take stock. This is a process of joint learning.

In an open-ended political process, citizens cannot necessarily know at the beginning exactly what the process will produce. Each concrete step forward may produce learning that makes possible achievements that were not possible before. Continuous evaluation of progress together generates learning and deepens their relationship—their capacity to make mid-course corrections and to tackle new problems or opportunities as they arise.

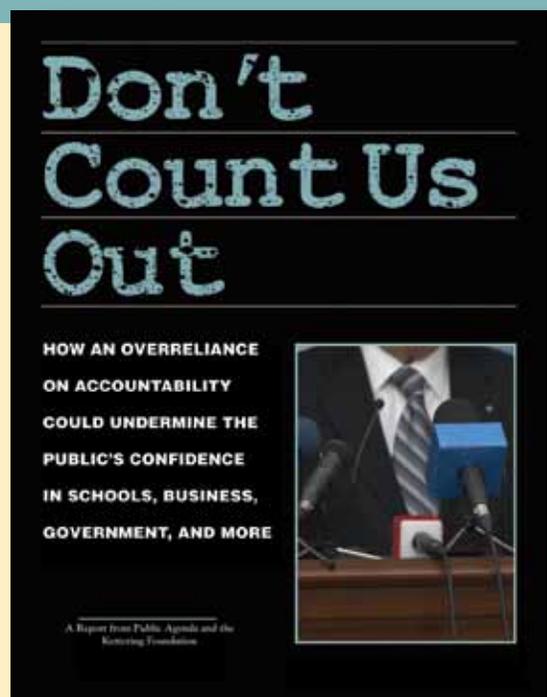
Power is the capacity to influence the course of events. Citizens can generate the power to accomplish their goals when they discover that they can be capable political actors. As they learn, the community learns.

Harold Saunders is Director of International Affairs at the Kettering Foundation and president of the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue. He can be reached at hsaunders@kettering.org.

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