A Note from the Editor

As regular readers of Connections know, the Kettering Foundation organizes its work into research on citizens, communities, and institutions. Each year, the foundation reviews and evaluates possibilities for new lines of research through the “lens” of one of the areas. The current focus is through the lens of community, a term which refers to the places where people develop networks of civic relationships to achieve goals vital to their individual and collective interests. In communities, people educate future generations in shared norms and essential skills, protect themselves from threats, and create the conditions that allow them to prosper economically. The interactions among the people of a place—joined in ever-changing alliances of civic associations and formal institutions—are what determine the capacity of a community to address those goals. Maintaining and building the community is a matter of maintaining and building these relationships.

Early in the current review, it became clear that behind many of the concerns about the role of citizens in politics is a critical and largely unrecognized problem: the idea of communities as arenas of collective acting is increasingly unrecognized. And it is not only that that frame of reference is missing in the formal institutions and agencies charged with serving the public interest; as recent reports by Richard Harwood show, the insight is lacking even in the community-based organizations that have historically been the entryways for citizens into public life. (See the review by Connie Crockett on p. 29.)

One symptom of the problem can be seen in the widely documented reports of people’s sense of their collective political impotence. People feel there is little chance that they, or “people like them,” can do anything to act effectively on their concerns. What is the problem? Our review recognized one well-researched part of the challenge: citizen-directed civic initiatives are often blocked by formal organizations and government agencies. But there appears to be an even more fundamental underlying problem. The thin notion of the role of public life in community leaves many such initiatives unimagined and thus untried. With that problem in mind, we identified the logical follow-up question as the overarching theme of the year’s review: how can the concept of communities as arenas for collective acting be recognized and illuminated? The question is motivated, of course, by the foundation’s primary interest in how people can more effectively marshal their civic resources in order to shape their collective future.

The following essays provide a partial record of what we are finding. They highlight the challenges faced by citizens, civic associations, and formal institutions in identifying and making practical use of the concept of communities as places of public work. They also provide a sense of the various networks of exchange through which the foundation works. The foundation conducts its research with community groups, government agencies, research organizations, and scholars through joint-learning agreements. Throughout the year, workshops bring together people working in related areas to exchange findings and make sense of what they mean. In what follows, readers will find what we hope are illuminating references to the various ways the foundation goes about its work.

Based on an understanding of research through networks of exchange, we want to encourage readers to share with us their own experiences and suggestions for others who might collaborate in the research. Authors of the essays that follow were encouraged to write with that sort of reader in mind, which suggests posing questions rather than answering them. You are encouraged to join the conversation, through the Readers’ Forum found at www.kettering.org.

—Randall Nielsen
Looking Back/Looking Ahead at Communities
David Mathews

A Need for Human Logic in Education
Bob Cornett

Taking a Look at Organic Community-Level Politics
Derek Barker, Gina Paget, and Dorothy Battle

Developing Civic Practices in South African Communities
Teddy Nemeroff

Community Change and Action Research: The Unrealized Potential of Cooperative Extension
Alice Diebel

What’s Changed? Are Citizens Reestablishing Education Ownership?
Patricia Moore Harbour

Communities as Educators: A Report on the November 2007 Public and Public Education Workshop
Connie Crockett

Self-Organizing and Community Politics
Phil Stewart

Preparing Today’s Kids for Tomorrow’s Jobs: What Should Our Community Do?
Bob McKenzie

Public Work vs. Organizational Mission
Connie Crockett

Studies of a Role for Communities in the Face of Catastrophe
Paloma Dallas

Books Worth Reading

Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy
By Diana C. Mutz, reviewed by Matthew Johnson

Innovation: The Missing Dimension
By Richard K. Lester and Michael J. Piore, reviewed by Randall Nielsen
Twenty-five years ago, U.S. citizens lamented over the findings of the President’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Education. “A rising tide of mediocrity” was eroding our educational system. The title of this report, A Nation at Risk, sounded the alarm. Change in education was a matter of urgency. This 1983 report was the impetus for a variety of education reform strategies and a stream of federal legislation. The most current legislation is No Child Left Behind.

Greg Toppo, in a recent USA Today article, “Nation at Risk: Best Thing or Worst
What’s Changed? Are Citizens Reestablishing Education Ownership?

Thing for Schools," listed five key recommendations. Only one recommendation mentioned citizens. In the recommendation for leadership/fiscal support, Toppo pointed out, “Citizens should hold educators and elected officials responsible for leadership and fiscal support to drive reform.” Certainly unintentional, this recommendation may have relegated citizens to a backseat in the drive for education reform. I wonder if this Nation at Risk recommendation undergirded a shift in thinking about the public’s role and responsibility for education. Further, does this report imply that democracy, as well, is at risk?

Citizen teachers emerge who do not think of themselves as teachers or educators but who care about youth and community.

Many citizens felt frustrated with schools and they no longer believed they could make a difference or change education. As the report recommended, they pressured political leaders and educators to ‘do something’ to improve education. Schools pushed back, and adversarial relationships deepened between schools and the public. Education became a political battlefield of blame and shame.

For three decades, I worked and observed ups and downs, successes and missteps in public education. Most of my time in education was spent on the firing line working inside urban and suburban school systems. I was a teacher, facilitated staff development and educational reform workshops for teachers and administrators, developed curriculum and instructional strategies, and became a school principal. In every position it was my responsibility to consult and involve parents, as well as, “answer to them.” I believed these were their schools and their children.

Later, as assistant superintendent, I provided leadership for all elementary schools in an urban district. Here citizens spoke with their feet and with their vote. Flight from public schools and failed bond levies increased. Partisan politics, rhetoric, harsh media stories and territorial battles prevailed. Public education, in crisis, was caught between the demands of a powerful mayor, a “stand her ground” superintendent, intervening city council members, outspoken angry parents, a hard-nosed judge monitoring court-ordered desegregation, and frustrated business and influential community leaders. School board members, who were perceived as concerned more with their personal political agendas, failed to achieve a policy level necessary to meet educational goals crucial for students’ achievement and community aspirations. Therefore the district was defensive and constantly reacting. The “colorful twists and spins” portrayed in the media may have been the most challenging and damaging. The public felt betrayed and its trust in the schools vanished. The media’s focus on the “sensational” news rarely reflected a balanced perspective. Nationally, this media practice and disconcerting actions by schools further aggravated the public’s loss of trust. This was true in district after district, just as, state and mayoral school takeovers became commonplace.

Was the public’s voice silenced as elected officials became the decision makers for school districts? Community and parental ownership for public education is ancient, not new. Public ownership and responsibility of education is at the heart of our democracy.

Nationally, charter schools, home schooling, and other alternatives grew in opposition to public schools. At the same time, even in the face of disappointment with the performance of schools and educators, communities created Public Education Funds to provide finance programs that weren’t funded by school budgets. Businesses, often in response to tax abatement requirements formed separate school and business partnership organizations to fund local school and teacher projects. Although parents, citizens, and the public were engaged in these efforts, providing funding, resources and in-kind services, they still felt isolated from the education process and that they could not make a difference.

Has something changed? Is there a new venue in which parents and community can “educate” young people and make a difference? Is there a viable strategy whereby community can restore, public ownership and responsibility for education, a core principle of democracy? Is democracy at risk?

In our research we found, in many communities, leaders and advocates for youth education had grown tired of the hassle with the bureaucracy in schools and found youth development to be the vehicle they could use to make a difference. With this, education working in communities moved beyond the limitations of being “just” a funding source and offering alternatives to poorly performing schools to broadening their position and building youth-development programs. This seems to expand the landscape for community education. Citizen teachers emerge who do not think of themselves as teachers or educators but who care about youth and community.

These youth-development programs are initiated from diverse sources: health and public works departments, retired professional baseball players, and owners of retired champion racehorses, the zoo, environmental and choral organizations, city managers and mayors’ offices, family farms, cultural arts programs, civic organizations, and many other sources. Programs teach new skills, tutoring, career awareness, cultural enrichment, character development, and a plethora of other educational experiences yet to be identified.
Numerous pioneering youth-development efforts across the United States led by individuals, organizations, communities, and institutions are breaking new ground in educating youth. We notice the focus on youth development, rather than an emphasis on “schooling,” schools, or even education, has many benefits. The concern for youth seems to be a unifying theme while talk about school evokes an emotional response that can lead to solution wars and polarization.

Does an emphasis on youth development bring communities together? When “educating” in the community do citizens feel less burdened by bureaucracy and more able to contribute and make a difference? Does the public feel a greater sense of urgency and ownership beyond the boundaries of school? Does a focus on youth development result in powerful community building and the development of new relationships across racial and economic barriers? Who are the others we can engage to explore these and other questions?

We are attempting to identify “the Village” of citizen teachers, individuals, institutions, organizations, and communities focused on the growth, development, education, and well-being of youth in their communities. We want to know to what extent there is a relationship between community development and youth development. Can we map the landscape of “education in the community” through listening to citizen educators’ stories and experiences to better understand who they are, what they do, why they do it, and what they are learning?

Readers are invited to share comments, recommendations, names of individuals, organizations, communities, and institutions with experiences and stories relevant to this research. Please feel free to distribute this commentary to others with similar interests and programs and contact us.

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HAVE YOUR SAY... Discuss the ideas explored in Connections

in Kettering’s Readers’ Forum at www.kettering.org
Agent of Democracy: Higher Education and the HEX Journey

From the editors of the Higher Education Exchange, David W. Brown and Deborah Witte

Ten thoughtful theorists and practitioners address how higher education prepares citizens for public life, how (and why) universities engage in the larger community, and how we can rediscover the civic roots of higher education. This book of essays is a contribution to a resurgent movement bent on strengthening higher education’s democratic mission and fostering a more democratic culture throughout American society.

Deliberation and the Work of Higher Education: Innovations for the Classroom, the Campus, and the Community

Edited by John R. Dedrick, Laura Grattan, and Harris Dienstfrey

This thoughtful collection of essays describes in candid and practical terms the ways that deliberation both inside and beyond the classroom can be used to support students’ development as responsible citizens. . . . It’s hard to imagine a richer bounty.

—Anne Colby, senior scholar, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

NEW BOOKS AVAILABLE FROM KETTERING FOUNDATION PRESS

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Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue

By Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan

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—David Mathews, president, Kettering Foundation

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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. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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