The Changing Culture of Learning
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.

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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 school board reacted by filling the empty seats at Aiken with students expelled from other schools or whose parents did not designate a high school for them. Many students were there involuntarily. With few neighborhood children attending, outside students transported in rampant discipline problems and dismal performance metrics. By 2005, the perception of Aiken as a hopeless “school of last resort” populated with “the worst of the worst” had become deeply rooted. Residents saw little reason to support the school because “those aren’t even our kids,” and Aiken became an unwanted entity, isolated from the surrounding community.

Residents soon saw the effects a failing public school could have on a neighborhood. Property values dropped and potential home buyers looked elsewhere. Aiken was College Hill’s largest source of calls to police, primarily for fights and drugs, occasionally for weapons. Nearby residents were infuriated by students blocking street traffic, trespassing, and vandalizing. Business owners complained of unruly students loitering during school hours. As the exodus of College Hill students from Aiken continued and the school spiraled downward, the community deemed it unworthy of any effort to change its fate.

A single resident, fed up with loitering truants and the staggering number of police runs to the school, sent a personal e-mail to everyone on her community list. With the subject line “Whose School Is This Anyway?” she outlined the school’s failings and her frustration, urged residents to take ownership of the school, and invited all, including Aiken principals and staff, to meet. Her rallying cry “We have to do something!” sparked what would become a civic movement.

A large number of residents and Aiken staff responded. The residents were not part of any organization but a broad-based collection of like-minded individuals with various reasons for participation, no background in education, and no children attending Aiken. With brutal honesty, these residents raised specific criticisms, declared the status quo intolerable, and
demanded change. Some administrators
were defensive; some teachers were in
fears as they acknowledged problems but
had no idea how to change course. The
staff explained obstacles to progress to help frame critical issues. Many students
had absent parents, lived in poverty, and
lacked essential clothing and necessities.
Residents were willing to help meet basic
needs but faced with overwhelming and
complex societal issues, the group strug-
gled for direction.

At the urging of the community, the
separate schools were consolidated, and
a new principal was assigned to Aiken.
Committed to a community partnership,
the principal disclosed the extent of the
school’s problems so innovative solu-
tions could be discussed. Residents were
shocked at the number of students deal-
ing with pregnancy, untreated illness and
injuries, malnutrition, substance abuse,
and violence or a complete lack of sup-
port at home. Students with disabilities
comprised approximately 45 percent of
the population. More citizens came to
realize that accountability for education
cannot solely rest on the school’s shoul-
ders. The community assigned liaisons to
the school and meetings between admin-
istrators and residents continued.

As this collaboration was starting
to develop, the Cincinnati school board
announced that Aiken was slated to be
demolished and replaced with a state-of-
the-art school. A large faction of residents,
uninvolved in the Aiken partnership,
organized in protest. They wanted Aiken
closed and razed, arguing that a new
building could not transform Aiken into a
place of learning. These residents viewed
the Aiken plan as a waste of tax dollars and
suggested the land be sold for other develop-
ment. Their common response to the prospect of losing the school and its
students was, “Good riddance.” While other
neighborhoods might mourn the loss of
a local school, many College Hill residents,
given a choice, preferred no local public
high school to having Aiken.

Amid the swirl of heated rhetoric sur-
rounding Aiken’s future, the grassroots
group, in conjunction with the principal
and staff, hunkered down to deliber-
ate issues and define roles and goals. A
comprehensive plan was agreed upon in
which Aiken instituted policies to address
residents’ grievances, including mandatory
uniforms to deter truancy, a cell phone
ban, and strict disciplinary rules. The
academic program was retooled, expecta-
tions were raised, and a new culture of
learning took shape. Community mem-
bers pressured the school board to allow
systemic changes and to revise enroll-
ment procedures so Aiken was no longer
the “dumping ground” for expelled and
unassigned students.

Residents committed to support Aiken’s efforts to build relationships
with students for integration into the com-

munity and off-campus socialization.

Over time, the resi-
dents clamoring to close
Aiken fell silent as they
saw students volunteer-
ing at clean-up events,
serving at community
potluck dinners, and
assisting senior citizens.
Community members
and organizations
donated basic necessities and uniforms,
sponsored and attended school events,
provided incentive awards, and helped
involve students’ parents in the school.
Students reported their achievements at
community council meetings, and while
there, observed real-life lessons in democ-

racy. A local retirement community estab-
lished an internship program to provide
students with work experience for school
credit, allowing them to learn workplace
skills and develop bonds with elderly
residents. One resident organized and
financed a bus trip to a downtown restaur-
ant for students interested in learning eti-
quette and improving social skills. At every
opportunity, neighborhood organizations
publicized the Aiken students’ community
work and personal successes at meetings,
while local newsletters published photo-
laden articles. In a partnership strength-
ened by continuous communication and
joint efforts, Aiken and the community
continued to fulfill their agreed-upon
responsibilities to each other.

Ever so gradually, a change in percep-
tion occurred as residents interacted with
students and saw their determination to
seize learning opportunities and succeed
despite daunting disadvantages. When
students and residents understood that
each group was trying to connect with
the other, relationships and mutual trust
began to develop. For the students, the
“light bulb” realization that the community
truly supported them came when resi-

From “That School” to “Our School”

A single resident inspired a grassroots
group which evolved into what
Kettering might call a “community board
of education.” This group—and the
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even if the students were “not our kids,”
Aiken was “our school in our community.”

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of education.” This group—and the
community—had come to realize that
even if the students were “not our kids,”
Aiken was “our school in our community.”
the principal and the resident who initiated the civic alliance responded that calling Aiken an asset is “a bit of a stretch.” Neither believes the community as a whole has embraced the school and its students but described the relationship as one of “tolerance.” While both acknowledged remarkable achievement, they see a work in progress with opportunities to build on relationships and momentum generated by improvement. “Aiken is not an asset … yet.”

The community learned that something as monumental as improving a failing school cannot be accomplished easily or quickly, but that it can be done. A single resident inspired a grassroots group which evolved into what Kettering might call a “community board of education.” This group—and the community—had come to realize that even if the students were “not our kids,” Aiken was “our school in our community.” The growing group mobilized to take ownership of the school and accepted the community’s role in the students’ educational experience as it transcends the classroom. Higher expectations, coupled with community support, increased the students’ expectations for themselves, and those expectations are being met.

Residents discovered that a dynamic citizenry is a powerful force, especially in a partnership. By promoting interaction that shaped the students’ attitudes about themselves and as members of the community, residents also found they weren’t merely helping create a better school, but creating a new culture of learning.

Aiken’s principal recently has been promoted to Director of Innovations for Cincinnati public schools and the community is heavily involved in the search for a new principal who will keep Aiken on its ascending path. The community remains committed to developing a partnership with a new administration to continue Aiken’s transformation from a school of last resort to a school of choice. And in this ongoing journey for improvement, the community is unwilling to take even a single step backward.

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