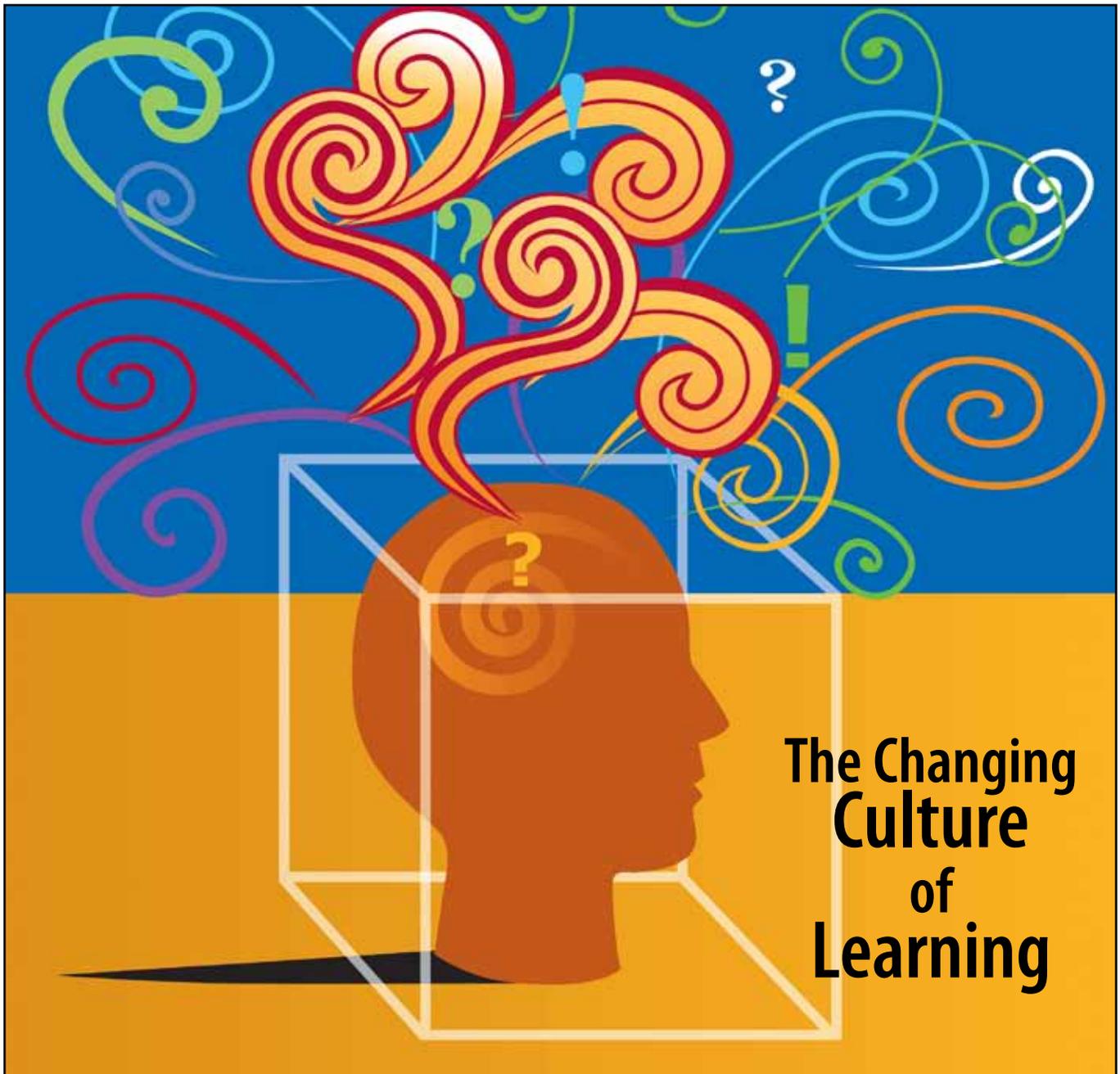


THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

# CONNECTIONS

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2011



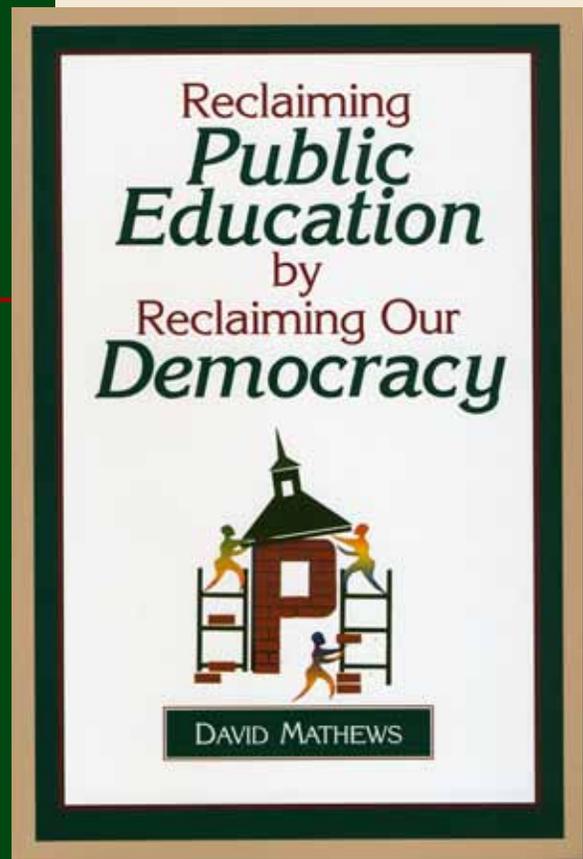
**The Changing  
Culture  
of  
Learning**

# 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.



Kettering Foundation Press | 2006  
165 pages  
trade paper \$9.95

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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. 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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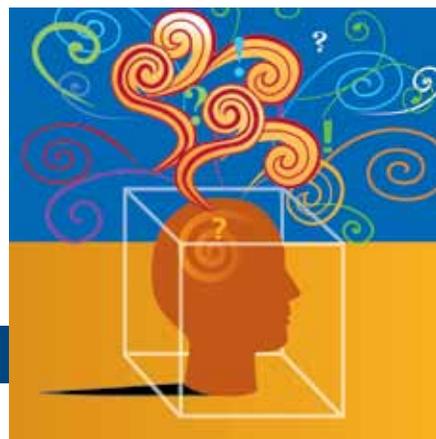
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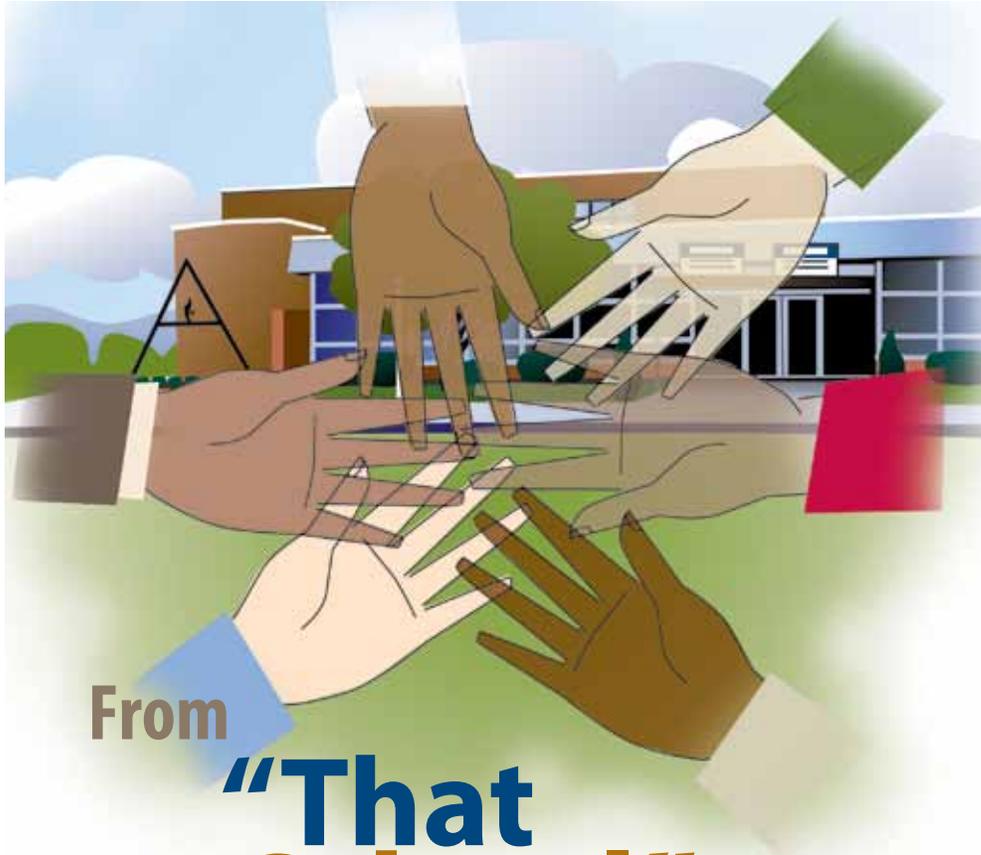
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From

# “That School” to “Our School”

## A Community Lesson in the Power of Partnership

By Elizabeth Sherwood

Once the shining gem in the Cincinnati public school system and a source of fierce neighborhood pride, Aiken High School gradually lost stature in every measurable attribute—academic performance, graduation rates, student behavior, and state ratings. The campus operated as three separate high schools, with three principals, creating an environment of dysfunction, confusion, and competition. As the school’s decline accelerated, local parents chose to send their children to private and magnet schools outside their neighborhood of College Hill.

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

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## From “That School” to “Our School”

demanded change. Some administrators were defensive; some teachers were in tears 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 struggled 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 solutions could be discussed. Residents were shocked at the number of students dealing with pregnancy, untreated illness and injuries, malnutrition, substance abuse, and violence or a complete lack of support 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 shoulders. The community assigned liaisons to the school and meetings between administrators 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 development. 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 surrounding 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, expectations were raised, and a new culture of learning took shape. Community members pressured the school board to allow systemic changes and to revise enrollment procedures so Aiken was no longer the “dumping ground” for expelled and unassigned students.

Residents committed to support Aiken’s efforts and build relationships with students for integration into the community and off-campus socialization.

Over time, the residents clamoring to close Aiken fell silent as they saw students volunteering 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 democracy. A local retirement community established 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 restaurant for students interested in learning etiquette 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 strengthened 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 perception 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-

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**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.”**

dents raised \$8,000 in 8 days to fund college tours for 20 students who otherwise would have been unable to participate. Further deepening relationships, Aiken has hosted an annual Community Appreciation Breakfast to recognize the wide range of community support of the students.

Years of partnership between the school and the community are paying dividends. Police runs are now rare, disciplinary problems are minimal, the graduation rate has increased, and a significant percentage of students are bound for college or additional education. By 2010, Aiken’s state ranking had risen three levels, from Academic Emergency to Effective, falling just shy of an Excellent rating. Each success encouraged all parties to work harder, and these statistics followed.

Spoiler alert: This story does not have a Hallmark television movie happy ending. When separately asked how Aiken became an asset to the community, both

## ADDITIONAL READING FROM KETTERING

### **Doing Democracy:** How a Network of Grassroots Organizations Is Strengthening Community, Building Capacity, and Shaping a New Kind of Civic Education

By *Scott London*

This report examines a burgeoning network of organizations that is inventing new forms of community renewal and citizenship education. Their common aims: tackling tough public issues, strengthening communities, and nurturing people's capacities to participate.

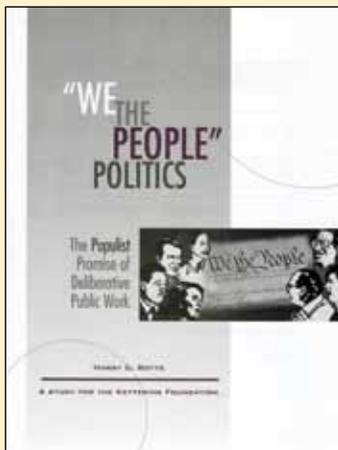


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### **“We the People” Politics:** The Populist Promise of Deliberative Public Work

By *Harry C. Boyte*

If Americans are to reverse the sense that we are losing control over our collective future, the author argues, it is urgent that we recover and expand on a politics of deliberation and public work, with deep roots in the populist tradition.

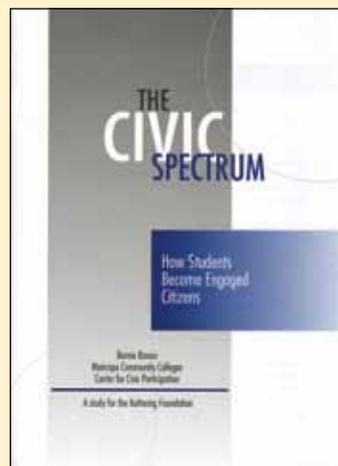


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### **The Civic Spectrum:** How Students Become Engaged Citizens

By *Bernie Ronan*

Classroom learning, community service, and political engagement are all essential parts of the civic spectrum required to help students become engaged citizens. The author focuses in particular on community colleges, which, he says, play a pivotal role in educating students for civic engagement.



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### From “That School” to “Our School”

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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