

Letting Foundation

# CONNECTIONS

Winter 2006



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## Regaining Our Sense of Community

### Challenge Two

*Other studies propose that the sense of community and the common good are being supplanted by self-interest, thus communities become dysfunctional and common problems go unsolved.*

# Engaging Untapped Community Resources

*By Carolyn Farrow-Garland*

**W**hat does it take to solve community problems? What does it mean to tap community resources? Can public deliberation and dialogue catalyze the resources among people in minority and low-income communities? What are people in these communities willing to do? Research on untapped community resources seeks to answer these questions.

Kettering Foundation contends that people in minority and low-income communities represent an untapped community resource that could add value in the addressing of public problems. Racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and poor people are rarely consulted by government and political leaders when community issues arise. Their associations with government institutions oftentimes place them on the receiving end for services and assistance. Rarely are they viewed as having anything meaningful to contribute. The result is that people in these communities lose confidence in their capacities to engage in community problem solving, and they become disconnected from civic discourse in the wider community.

## Challenge Two

There are many people in these communities who are willing to engage in the meaningful public work necessary to resolve common problems. For example, one major focus in some of these communities has been improving education, which is one of the primary reasons that alternatives, such as charter schools, have gained credibility in inner-city communities. People contribute something important to the very fragile community infrastructure. Churches and youth centers serve as public spaces, where people provide after school care, tutoring, youth recreation, and other services. Too often, however, these efforts are unnoticed and undervalued. John Kretzman and John McKnight of Northwestern University were among the first scholars to map the assets in these communities. Their work with residents in low-income neighborhoods in inner-city Chicago illuminated the overlooked potential of community institutions.

These community institutions lack bridges to the broader community, to political networks and places where decisions are made. In the 2001 publication entitled, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*, author Mark Warren highlights the disconnect between local community institutions and our political systems. He argues that, in addition to focusing on the institutional life that still exists in communities, effective strategies are needed to enhance the leadership of community members and to bridge social capital across communities, especially those divided by race.

In a recent Kettering workshop series, participants engaged in a community discovery process designed to better

understand how people actually engage in problem solving related to education. Participants were from six communities: a rural community in Kentucky; a Native

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**Effective strategies are needed to enhance the leadership of community members and to bridge social capital across communities, especially those divided by race.**

American community in South Dakota; and African American communities in Dayton, Ohio, Helena, Arkansas, and Montgomery County, Maryland.

The purpose of the workshop series was to explore what community members might do to deal with the problems of education. Our hope was to identify how work by people in these communities might serve as a bridge to establishing better relationships with the schools in the community.

This research informs Kettering's understanding of public practices related to research on the Public and Public Schools. However, the results also provide relevant insights into research in areas of Community Politics and Leadership and for how people develop connections with public institutions.

The workshop participants have used different approaches in attempting to engage their communities. All have been involved in convening public forums on community issues and are viewed as civic leaders or community organizers. We began by using questions outlined in *Hard Talk*, a guide developed by Kettering Foundation to stimulate dialogue. *Hard Talk* is designed for community members interested in engaging in dialogue and interrogating their own experiences pertaining to learning and education. The questions encourage people to think about their learning experiences, to reflect on something important they learned, and to describe the person who taught that lesson.



## Challenge Two

Typically, people report that the most valuable lessons were not taught by teachers in classrooms but by family members and people in their close circle or community. In discussing what people have to offer to the education of children, community members find that they have skills and assets and can contribute something valuable. They identify work they can do to help supplement formal education systems.

Consider the following examples: In one rural Kentucky community, a group of Latina grandmothers began volunteering in their community schools. This was unique in that the grandmothers themselves determined what needed to be done and offered their services to the school system. There are countless examples of schools inviting people from communities into partnerships, but the schools tend to define the purpose and establish the terms of the public engagement. In this instance, the grandmothers identified the work they could do.

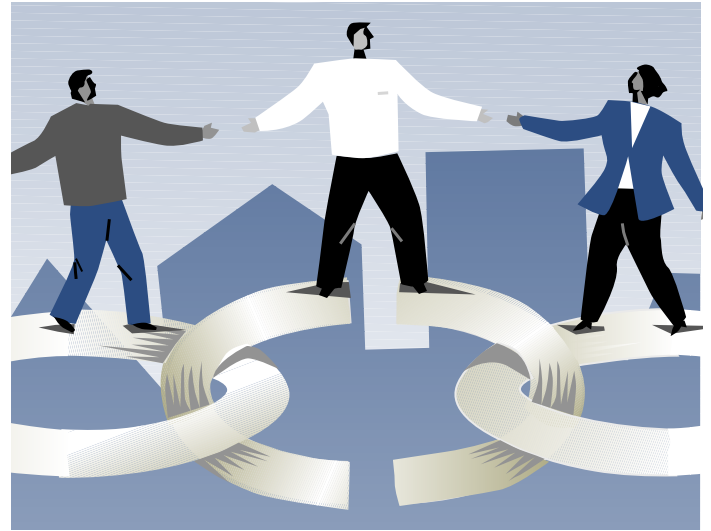
and activists, who provided leadership in breaking down education discrimination barriers almost a half century ago, convened a forum to reflect on the significance of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the United States Supreme Court.

Their reflections led to a series of dialogic conversations in which they determined that they had abandoned the cause of education, leaving the responsibility of education to teachers and other school professionals. This insight has resulted in a renewed commitment to focus on education issues and continue the work of bringing about educational equity.

In both rural Kentucky and Montgomery County, when the public stepped forward, there were institutions that reached out to accommodate these initiatives. For example, when the Latina grand-

mothers were unable to produce the long list of documents required to volunteer in schools, the school administrators accepted alternative documentation, such as letters of reference from the parish priest. In Montgomery County, the local community college had been trying for months to reach out to the African American leadership in the county when the men and women from the *Brown v. Board* dialogue stepped forward and requested a meeting to learn how they might work together to improve public education. Efforts in Helena, Arkansas, and Cincinnati, Ohio, met resistance.

The important question is what lessons can be drawn from the experience of connecting with untapped community resources? Our research helped to reveal that opportunities for dialogue within



communities are limited. The need for what the foundation calls “public space” is vitally important. These local spaces provide opportunities for people in communities to engage in public dialogue. Public space is a necessary precondition for public work. What people decide to do will depend in large part on their capacities and their sense that it is possible for them to do something to address a problem. To the outside world, their efforts often appear to be small, tentative steps. Yet, such steps build on one another.

We also learned that these communities need leadership. But the leadership must emerge from within the community. Community leaders encourage others and keep the process going even when attention is directed elsewhere and the pressure of busy lives takes over. People in communities need willing partners—people in formal institutions, such as schools, that recognize the advantages inherent in developing these types of relationships within their community.

It is clear that these elements are important for community-building. Yet these community initiatives raise many new questions concerning the overall effects of this type of public work. As Mark Warren noted in *Dry Bones Rattling*, revitalizing democracy requires community-building, but it also requires something more: creating institutional links between stronger communities and our political system.

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Most of the grandmothers are recent immigrants to the community and speak very little English. When the grandmothers deliberated, they discussed the value of education and contrasted the experiences in their former country with their experiences in the United States. They noted that, many times when they visited schools, teachers were busy with extraneous tasks that left little time for teaching. So, the grandmothers stepped forward and volunteered to help in classrooms with classroom organization work, such as making copies and other similar tasks. Their presence in the schools has contributed indirectly to fewer discipline problems and better communication between schools and working parents.

In Montgomery County, Maryland, African American community leaders

The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving 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.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research corporation supported by a \$250 million endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

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