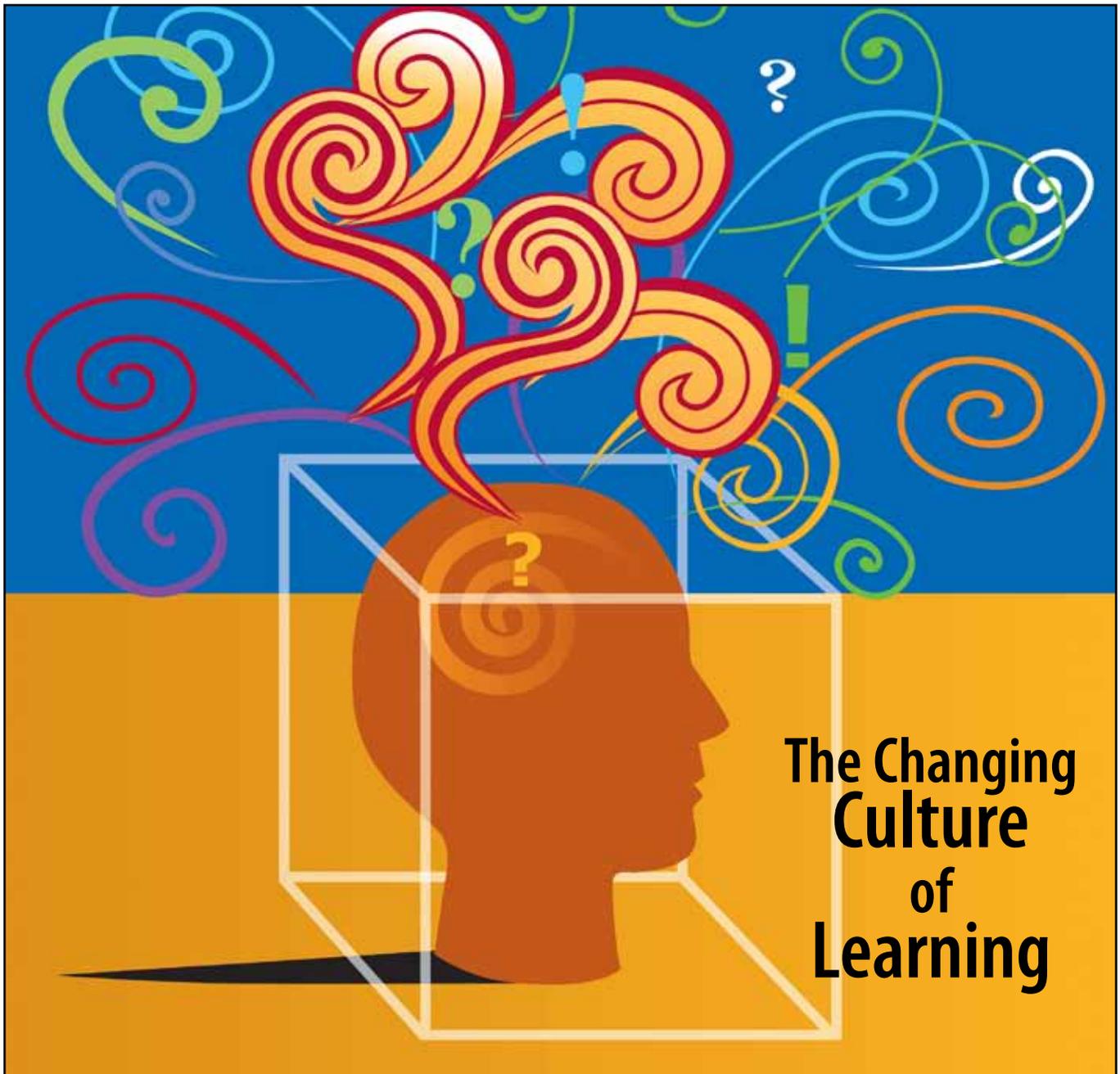


THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

# CONNECTIONS

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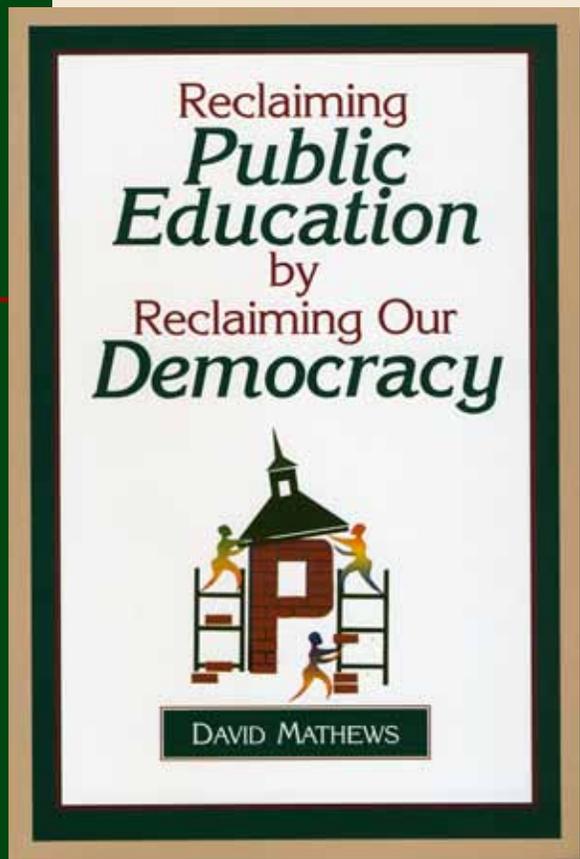
**The Changing  
Culture  
of  
Learning**

# 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](http://www.kettering.org).

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#### Copy Editor

Lisa Boone-Berry

#### Design and Production

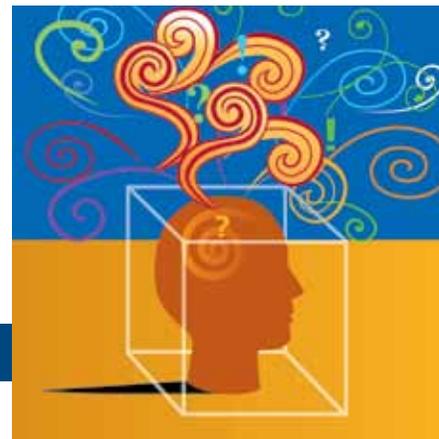
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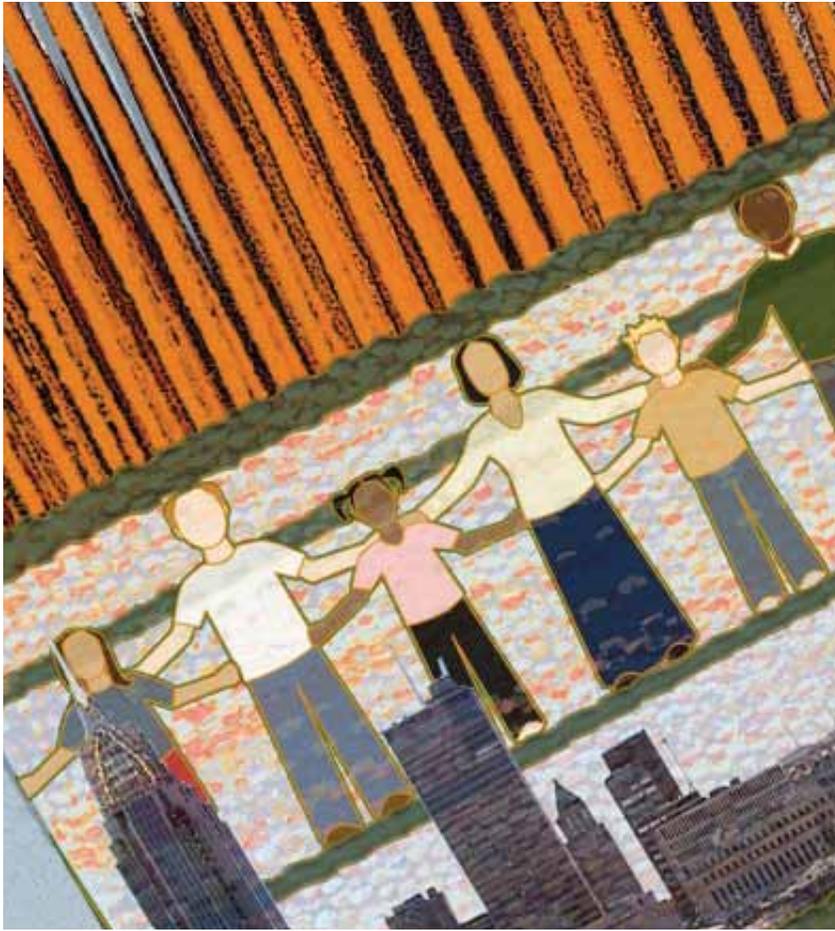
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# Mobile-izing Communities *and* Schools *for* Extraordinary Results

*By Carolyn Akers*

**T**he story of Mobile, Alabama, illustrates that action linking communities and schools works. Schools, classrooms, teachers, and student achievement scores improved. The achievement gap between those in poverty and those not in poverty and black and white students closed. Citizens believed that because of their work, students were learning more and had more opportunities than before. There are more students achieving at higher levels in Mobile than at any time in the community's history. The community also benefitted with more economic opportunities for more of its citizens. Anyone you ask—from the superintendent of schools to the mayor to the Chamber of Commerce—will tell you that the community played a critical role in the process.

This is a story about Mobile's success, which actually began as failure. The history of Mobile—its struggles, failures, and successes—created the "civic fabric" that served as the foundation for the development of a civic infrastructure and framework that ultimately transformed the city's schools and community.

In Mobile, three generations of citizens had grown up in a public school system so poorly funded that the community had accepted marginal performance as the norm. Mobile had once been a prominent symbol of hope and leadership in the state. The first public school bell rang in Alabama at Mobile's Barton Academy in 1836. And in 1854, the city's public school system became the model for the state education system. By the 1970s and 1980s, however, Mobile's school system was mired in conflict and philosophical differences, which led to negative attitudes in the community and deficit funding. The schools themselves were a mix of dreadful conditions and models of excellence. Citizens were angry and held little confidence in the school system's leadership. Strife among the leaders was frequent and the tenure of superintendents short and often ineffective. In the 15 years from 1973 to 1998, the Mobile County Public School System had 7 superintendents.

Over decades, civic pride eroded as the nation pointed its finger at Alabama, with the state ranking last in spending for the education of its children. Mobile was ranked last in the state. This crisis was a

## Mobile-izing Communities and Schools for Extraordinary Results

result of decades of apathy by elected officials with only selective improvements to the schools, leading to pockets of excellence and success but only for some. Though rarely openly discussed, the public indifference could be linked to Mobile's segregationist past. Until the 2001 ad valorem tax increase, proposed taxes had not increased school funding since 1961, two years before the schools were desegregated. The failure to approve additional revenue in 1988, 1992, and 1999 is well

be addressed. The community was ready to go to work. In 2001, voters in Mobile County approved a property tax linked to public education. This was the first successful tax increase for public schools in more than 40 years. Due to constitutional limits on the state's ability to levy taxes, schools in Alabama are chronically underfunded. The passage was not considered a mandate. Voters expected to see results for those tax dollars. They expected to see changes in how the system operated. The demand for accountability increased. The citizens voted that not only did they *need* to do something about the county's schools, they *wanted* to. An intensive public-engagement effort, coupled with a specific reform strategy, initiated the momentum for change.

### Creating the Civic Fabric

David Mathews in *For Communities to Work* suggests that "by a 'public,' we at the foundation, mean a

diverse body of people joined together in ever-changing alliances to make choices about how to advance their common well-being. By an 'engaged public,' we mean a committed and interrelated citizenry rather than a persuaded populace." In *Leading Change*, John P. Kotter suggests that there are eight steps involved in any organizational transformation. The first three steps: creating a sense of urgency, building the guiding team, and creating a shared vision are all involved in creating the civic fabric

of a community. The earned currency the community will stand on when it names and owns its problems is a result of how well that civic fabric is constructed. A fabric made up of a team of people that nobody appointed; that met and talked to lots of different people and wouldn't quit no matter what. A group so tenacious and committed that giving in to status quo would never be the norm. This fabric would contain a leaderful community—a broad-based group that represented the whole community. The leaderful community would not only build the leadership capacity with the "usual suspects" but would actively seek out the marginalized and typically disenfranchised and would develop specific strategies of getting them into the room and at the community table. A leaderful community knows that it needs one another to be better and stronger and that it needs to include both skeptics and advocates. The civic fabric would consist of continuous learning rather than declarations of victory; of knowledge learned vs. knowledge given. It would recognize leadership throughout the community rather than "the leaders." The civic fabric of a community is woven over time and experience. Once handcrafted, it serves as the core belief and value system of a community—its very character and the definition of how it does its business.

### Developing the Civic Infrastructure and Community Framework

Creating the civic infrastructure and framework in order to work included developing and identifying nurturing networks (civic brigade) and constructing an armada of initiatives to enable action and create learning communities hooked on progress, not success. This would require alignment of community resources; people, time, and money, and the development of an accountability mechanism to make it stick. In 2001, the Public Education Network received support from the Annenberg Foundation to lead a bold set of initiatives that were designed to stimulate and support public responsibility for public education. Mobile was one of the selected sites that worked to forge a stronger and more durable role for the public in the reform of its public schools. The goal was an active, informed

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**The civic fabric of a community is woven over time and experience. Once handcrafted it serves as the core belief and value system of a community—its very character and the definition of how it does its business.**

documented. Each of these was spearheaded by the business community in partnership with local elected officials.

At the same time Mobile was creating its civic fabric. The Public Education Coalition was convening citizens from the mid-1980s to the 1990s, comprising a loose-knit group of advocates and civic leaders with a collective sense of the issues, a shared language for what they were dealing with, and a conviction that the schools' problems should and could

#### Strategies used:



## Mobile-izing Communities and Schools for Extraordinary Results



constituency, broadly based in the community, that would hold a shared vision of school reform and would hold the school system accountable for delivering on that vision. The participating communities were expected to lay the groundwork for democratically determined education policies and services that would have staying power. The initiatives were designed to break out of stereotypical images of public engagement. The aim was to support active communitywide public participation in determining policy directions and holding the school system accountable. As evaluator of the initiatives, Policy Studies Associates (PSA) documented the initiatives. Based on comprehensive analysis, they concluded that in one of the sites—Mobile, Alabama—“the initiative organized broad-based public participation and that policy and practice have changed in response to public engagement.” In Mobile, three strategies became the focus of efforts: a citizen-driven, long-range plan for school improvement,

a data-driven system for decision making, and an accountability mechanism to ensure movement toward a strategic plan. Successful education reform requires a broad and sustainable coalition of support that involves little *p* politics at its core. It also implies the implementation and institutionalization of policies, not just public endorsement, of the desire for change. The internal/external infrastructure is vital to policy change and creating the political will to make sure that the desired change happens.

### Conclusion

Civic capacity is about various sectors of the community coming together in an effort to solve a major problem. In our case that problem was our public schools. In Mobile, history had proven that education reform was not rocket science, but, very definitely political science. Researchers, educators, and reformers alike knew what sustainable reform looked like. The missing ingredient had been the public.

Reforming public schools is a political act, particularly if we are to achieve the levels of social equity and well-being to which we all aspire. So many of the solutions rest in the political realm at local, state, and national levels. Traditionally, for us, the public had been called upon to support public education, either by voting in additional revenue or volunteering in the classroom at the local school. They had been asked to participate in certain activities rather than as true partners and owners of the school system. We created the civic fabric and infrastructure intentionally to allow and prepare us to address the realities of how far off track our public education system was, especially for our minority and low-income students and others for whom our system was not working. To tackle the big issues like closing the achievement gap, increasing the graduation rate, decreasing the dropout rate, reforming high schools to its requirements of workforce and 21st-century skills requires both civic fabric and infrastructure. These are both unique to place and cannot be replicated through template.

Having worked in 11 communities so far it is clear that there are lessons learned: 1) “Ya gotta wanna” is an important first step. All 11 wanted to mirror the work that had occurred in Mobile and wanted a script and process. 2) There is no script and the process should be guided by the civic fabric of the community. No process will get you to long-term sustainability unless it builds on the beliefs, values, and norms of the designated community. The community is simply not ready for the investment over time and more often are interested in quick fixes, assigning blame, and setting unreal expectations for “someone or something” to do. 3) This isn’t about replicating the Mobile model but it is about creating a leaderful community that is continually learning from others; not imitating but adapting to its own journey. 4) This is a movement; not an event. 5) It’s about a community writing its own public story. And, 6) it is about learning how to fail successfully and not giving up the fight.

*Carolyn Akers is CEO at Mobile Area Education Foundation. She can be reached at [cakers@maef.net](mailto:cakers@maef.net).*

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