

# CONNECTIONS

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2007

A Year's Review  
from the Perspective  
of Citizens

WHAT IF?

IMAGINE THIS

COULD IT BE THAT?

MAYBE THE QUESTION WE SHOULD BE ASKING IS...

Introducing the  
**READERS' FORUM**  
See page 33

# What You Need to Know about *Connections*

**W**ith this issue of *Connections*, the Kettering Foundation introduces three significant initiatives for the newsletter.

The first is a decision to change *Connections* from a biannual publication to an annual. This new schedule corresponds with Kettering's review cycle, which goes like this: each year, Kettering focuses its research through a particular point of view, or, as we say at the foundation, lens. The foundation's research has three fundamental foci: citizens, communities, and democratic institutions. This reflects Kettering's hypothesis that democracy requires the following:

- citizens who can make sound decisions about their future;
- communities of citizens acting together to address common problems;
- institutions that are legitimate in the eyes of citizens and that support a democratic society.

By publishing *Connections* once a year, it will serve as a record of the foundation's research focus over the previous 12 months. Therefore, as you'll find throughout the following pages, this issue of *Connections* reflects the foundation's research over the last year—through the lens of citizens.

The second initiative is the addition of a new section, the "Readers' Forum." As its name implies, the new section



features reactions and comments by *Connections* readers, who were invited to review drafts of many of the articles that appear in this newsletter. With the help of our colleagues Connie Crockett and Alice Diebel, we interviewed 13 people from around the country about how their experiences relate to these articles. This feedback is organized into three articles related to the

foundation's hypothesis about democracy, as noted above. The "Forum" is described in more detail on page 33.

To make the new section a true "Readers' Forum," the foundation has devised a new way for readers to react to—and even to read—*Connections*. This is the third initiative: the creation of a new discussion area on the foundation's Web site, [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org). On the Web site you'll find a new section devoted to this issue of *Connections* and comment areas where readers can participate in a forum around the ideas expressed in the articles published in this issue.

The addition of both the print and online "Readers' Forum" is an attempt to help readers better connect to *Connections*—and the Kettering Foundation. But remember: the online forum will only be as good as you our readers make it.

—Deborah Witte and Bob Mihalek

# CONNECTIONS

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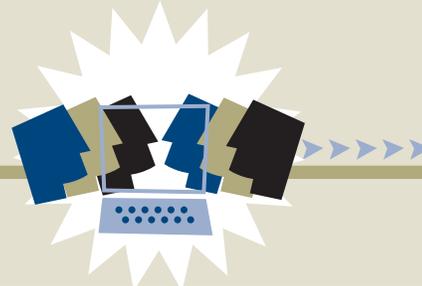
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# Public Engagement

## in Five Colorado School Communities

### A Report from the Colorado Association of School Boards

By Alice Diebel

**H**ow can citizens and school boards work together to educate a community's children? This is the question posed by the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB). To find an answer, the CASB studied the community-engagement efforts of five Colorado school districts.

The resulting series of unpublished cases provides examples of what can hap-

pen when local school boards attempt to change their relationship with the public. The CASB research highlights the factors that contribute to a gap between citizens and schools and among citizens themselves. These include districts with large and growing populations, professional educators who watch out for teacher self-interests, and school-board efforts to protect the educators. These factors make citizen engagement a challenge for the schools.

Despite the challenge, the CASB believes school boards are well suited to engage the local community. It sees school boards as the bridge between school professionals and citizens. The CASB recognizes that bridging diverse community and professional staff interests poses a challenge that requires school boards to lessen their focus on internal, administrative issues of accountability and instead turn attention outward to the community.

The five communities studied by the CASB had mixed success building this bridge. In three of the cases, the relationship change between the public and the school board was short lived. Because the boards had already determined the issues and the possible options to be considered

## Citizens and Local Boards

before going to the public for support, the public felt betrayed. The public believed that what they had to say was being ignored and that they were simply being used to legitimate the board's predetermined decisions. In these cases, the gap did not close, and the long-term relationship between the public and the school boards may even have deteriorated.

were well received by the community. Enlisting others in improving the crime and safety problem helped members of the school board relate to the community as a long-term partner on issues of mutual concern. The school board and citizens worked together on what was defined as the community's problem, not just the school's problem. This board saw

that its concerns about crime and safety should not, and could not, be resolved through internal school action alone, but required involving the larger community in understanding and addressing these concerns.

Similarly, in Jefferson County, the school superintendent redesigned the district's governance practices to

connect with the community's values. The superintendent established regular conversations between the school board and a large segment of the community it typically did not hear from. The conversations led to policy and curricula changes that reflected the community's values.

This change in relationship between the

school board and the public remained strong even when there was a change in superintendents.

The Sheridan and Jefferson cases teach the importance of changing the way school politics is done in a community. Three of the school boards saw the public in an instrumental way. They saw engagement as a way of legitimizing predetermined solutions rather than working together with citizens to identify and address shared problems. These school boards focused on issues in a way that implicated the schools as the only actor in solving the problems rather than seeing the community as having a role. They were not changing how they interacted with the public in any meaningful or lasting way. However, in Sheridan and Jefferson counties, the change in how they *interacted* came before the problems were clear and the solutions determined. Conversations began with questions about what the citizens want their community and schools to be and then moved to more specific issues.

These two cases demonstrate that school boards can establish mutually satisfying long-term relationships with the public. Yet for this to happen, boards must understand that they have a commitment to the public that includes building an ongoing relationship to address concerns that require a whole-community response. The Sheridan and Jefferson school systems minimized the kind of internal board politics typically seen in school boards and turned to their community for supportive deliberation. For changes like this to occur, the school and school boards need to revise their understanding of the roles they and the public can play. When given a chance to engage authentically in decision making, the public is likely to step up to the plate. It is this kind of intentional change in relationships that creates the fertile environment needed for citizens to engage problems publicly over time.

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### Boards must understand that they have a commitment to the public that includes building an ongoing relationship to address concerns that require a whole-community response.

Two of the Colorado cases stood apart from the others and their differences can be instructive. In the Sheridan school district, the city council and school board began collaborating to address significant community problems related to crime and safety that impacted the schools. Public forums about safety were held and

#### Jane W. Urschel, "Fed Up! Can School Boards Reconnect with Communities in Order to Govern Education and Learning?," *PRISM*, Spring 2004, pp. 16-17.

How would it matter if school boards recovered the sense of being citizen boards of education? One implication is that they would have to learn to engage communities, frame issues of contention, and facilitate dialogue in order to rebuild strong relationships with the public. They would have to collaborate with families by responding to their diverse needs. They would need to form partnerships among public schools, private schools, home schools, businesses and churches. In short, they would need to work together to form alliances with their rivals. The role of the locally elected school boards would be to fulfill the goals of the community—not just the goals of the school district—through balancing the competing values of democracy: liberty and equality, community and prosperity.

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

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