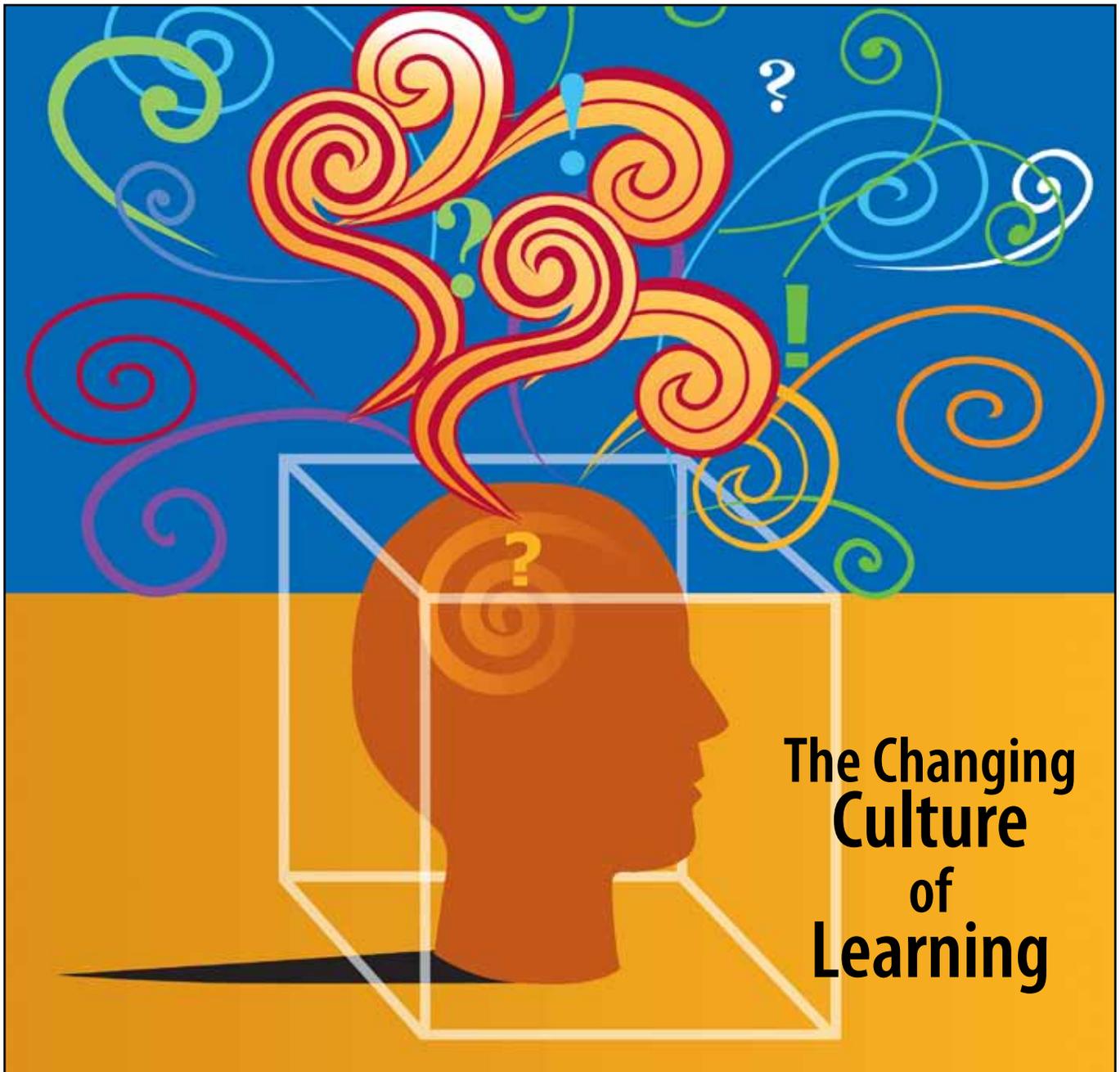


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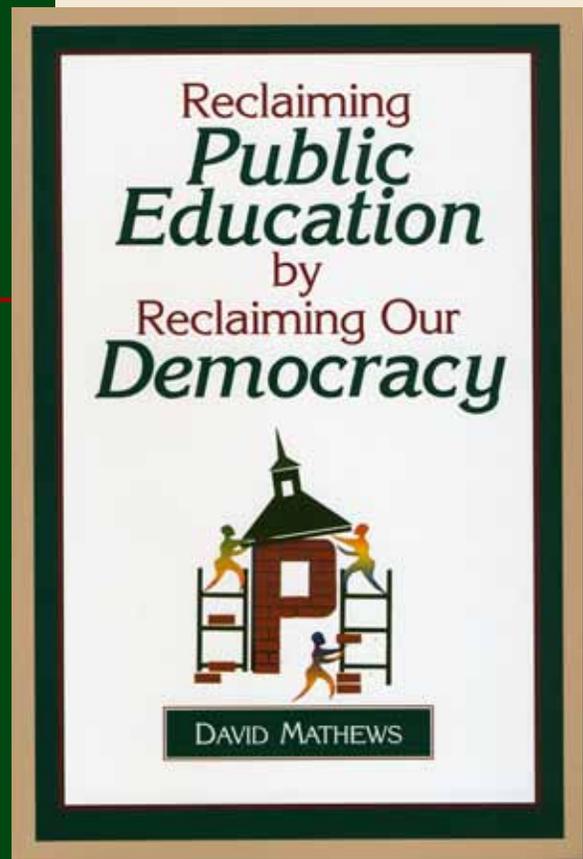
**The Changing
Culture
of
Learning**

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.



Kettering Foundation Press | 2006
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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.

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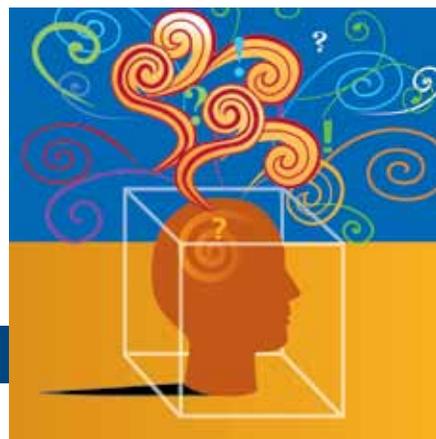
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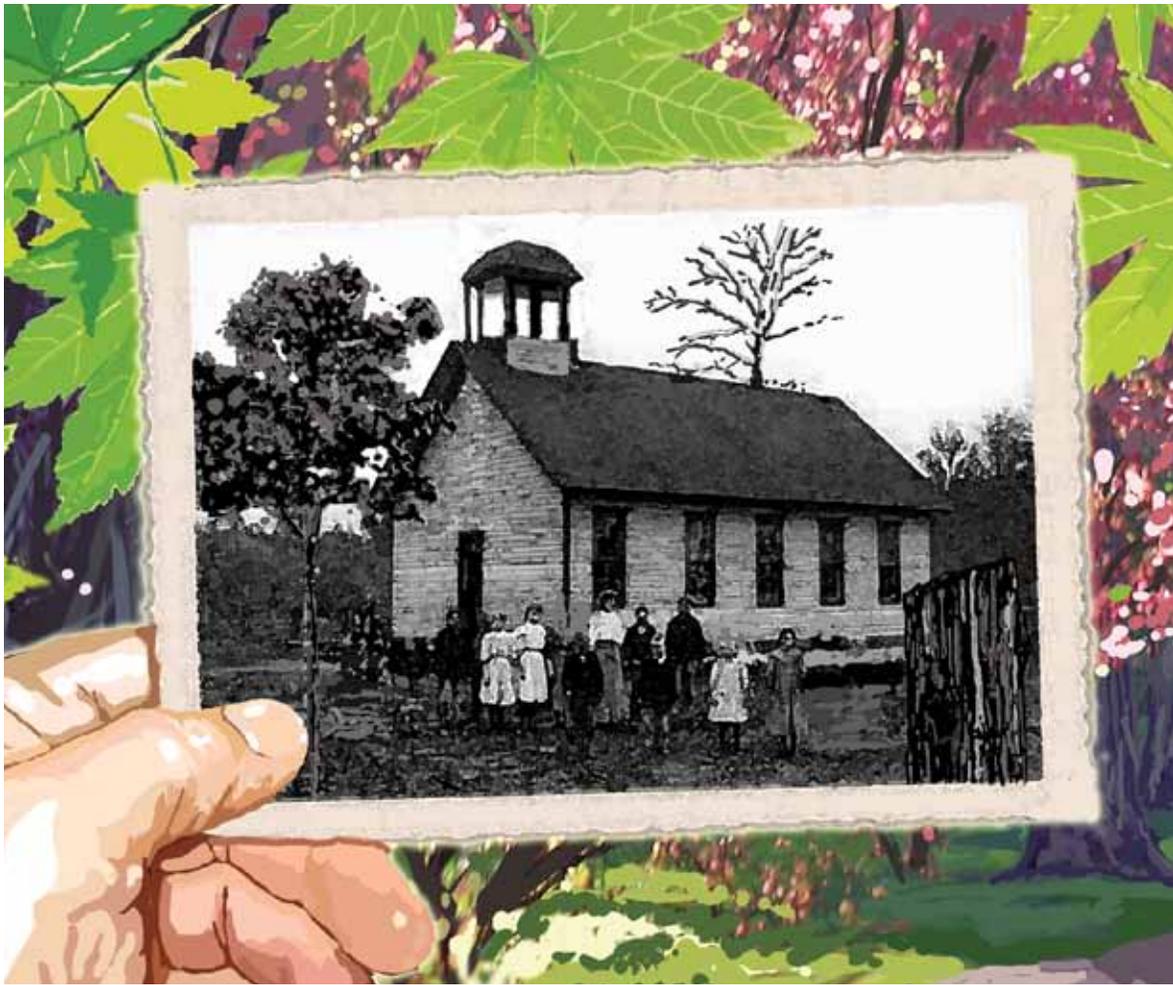
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Remembering *the* Public's Role

Early Public Education in Alabama

By Melinda Gilmore

On a sunny winter day in Baldwin County, Alabama, I drove a rented SUV down a paved road that eventually became a gravel road, a dirt road, and then seemingly no road. David Mathews; his wife, Mary; Davida Hastie, a local historian; and I were looking for the site of the first public school in Alabama. Of course we knew that short of doing an archaeological excavation, we weren't going to find the exact spot where the school sat. But just visiting the actual place, which is still quite rural and heavily forested with tall pine trees evoked a glimmer of what it might have been like to live in that area so many years ago.

Remembering the Public's Role

When I started working at the Kettering Foundation in the summer of 1999, I had no idea that it would lead to a deep immersion in early education research, particularly in looking at education in six counties in southwest Alabama. David Mathews was in the initial stages of writing a book about public education, using Alabama, his home state, as a source for an extended example of how the first public schools were created. To be honest, I doubt I'd given much thought to the public's role in education, let alone what pioneer schools might have been like, much beyond reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's books as a child. I attended public schools, and as an adult, I see the value in them as an integral part of the community and a common experience many of us share. Once I was immersed in this work, I could immediately see the relevance of this history to our experiences today.

Hands-on research took me to Alabama a number of times. Opening up archival boxes of materials led to little treasures that helped to fill in gaps in the history we were trying to unearth. In some cases, primary sources, such as a woman's diary, photographs, and maps, would lead us to new information. Reel upon reel of microfilm, preserving Mobile's first newspapers, helped bring into focus a pattern of public education in the city and its surrounding communities. When I wasn't in Alabama, we had access to materials at the Alabama Department of Archives and History through a researcher who I came to know well. He was particularly helpful with finding documents on the government's role in early education.

At times, I wondered whether my colleagues at the foundation thought we had been led astray, that we were spending too much time on "that Alabama book" and that it had little to do with Kettering's research. And yet, for me, it became clear that it had *everything* to do with that research. Knowing more about the early history of public education revealed what David Mathews has suspected and other

scholars, including Lawrence Cremin, have written about: that education is something created by communities, for communities. Today, some might say, the public schools are no longer the public's schools. Clearly, at some point we lost track of our educational history. Telling that story would be powerful, not only for the history itself, but also because it would help us to know something about community and education today.

We found that long before government got involved—before the state legislature officially chartered public education, before there was a state superintendent and strict evaluation measures—schools were created to fill a community need. Community members were actively involved in providing education. We could have been examining education in any state. The geographical details and the names of key players would change, of course, but essentially, this could be the story of the creation of schooling in the United States.

Many, many hours of research, writing, and revision eventually resulted in the publication of David Mathews' book, *Why Public Schools? Whose Public Schools? What Early Communities Have to Tell Us* (NewSouth Books, 2003). In that text, Mathews explains that people created the first schools in Alabama to serve their communities, no matter how small or primitive. As he notes, "schools enjoyed broad support in communities because they were seen as extensions of the communities; they were the public organized to make learning available." But why has the relationship between the schools and the public that first created them changed so much over time?

In Alabama, the first schools can be traced back to 1799, when John Pierce established a public school in Tensaw, Alabama, on Boatyard Lake in what is

now Baldwin County. (The very school we went looking for.) At that time, there were roughly 2,000 people living in the area—a school was certainly needed. Pierce had taught in Indiana before heading south, so he had experience with educating children. But he was not just an itinerant teacher; he was a member of the community and later became the postmaster for a number of years. He taught children from all backgrounds. In his 1851 history, A.J. Pickett writes that the students were "mixed in blood" and had skin "of every hue." Although we don't know all of the details of the school, we do know the

Although there are few records of the earliest schools, they do "suggest [the founders] had strong civic interests and spent a good deal of their time in community-building."

names of some of the families who sent their children there, including the Durants, Mimses, Taits, and Weatherfords. The Tensaw School, like many of the time, was a "blab school," meaning that lessons were learned through oral repetition.

Communities like Tensaw were lucky because they had an experienced teacher available. Other places, however, didn't have this luxury. Parents started many of the first schools, and instruction might have been held in someone's cabin until a schoolhouse could be built. A family member might have taught courses until a more experienced teacher could be hired. Mathews explains that many parents "acted in the interest both of their families and the settlements that hoped to grow into communities. Ultimately they did more than open a single school; they made education a tradition. When these founders died, others took up the

Remembering the Public's Role

responsibility for providing instruction." Although there are few records of the earliest schools, they do "suggest they [the founders] had strong civic interests and spent a good deal of their time in community-building." Founders felt they had a responsibility to teach these young people—both for the good of the children and because it could determine whether a settlement would flourish.

Although many argue that public education in Alabama began in 1854 when the state took formal responsibility, the schools in the first half of the 19th century were also public. They were created by citizens in local communities for the betterment of their children and ultimately the betterment of their neighborhoods.

Funding for the first schools initially came directly from parents, but later, subscriptions, essentially donations, allowed community members to contribute. Subscribers could donate money, land, or other needed items, and often their generosity would also give them voting power. Communities worked through formal and informal associations to create their schools, including women's associations, neighbors working in ad hoc groups, churches, independent teachers, and local governments. Some support for schools also came from the state legislature. And communities could sell a 16th section of land in each township in order to generate funds. Values of this land varied dra-

matically throughout the state, however, which meant that some schools had far fewer resources because their land was less desirable. In addition, population size varied, which meant that a more heavily populated area could be at a disadvantage.

Over time, education became more formalized, and a number of types of schools were created, including common schools and academies. Typically, these schools covered primary education, although some also had secondary instruction or even college-preparatory courses. At minimum, reading, writing, and arithmetic were taught. But many schools also included history, geography, public speaking, and even music, for both boys and girls. It was not uncommon for schools to sponsor "public examinations," which included speeches, plays, and recitals, so that members of the community could come and see what young people were learning—

an early form of accountability.

In cities like Mobile, a wide variety of opportunities for learning were available. Itinerant teachers and ministers provided classes. Seminaries for girls were established. And in 1826, an act was passed to create a board of school commissioners for the community. They were elected by citizens every five years to manage the public schools. One board member explained their mission, which was "to furnish public and popular instruction for the children of the great body of the population of the City."

With overwhelming support of the public, Alabama's legislative assembly passed the Free Public School Act in 1854,

which provided more equitable funding for schools throughout the state and a free primary education to children. The passage of this act signaled a shift in thinking from each community providing education for its children to a sense of collective responsibility for all children throughout the state. People supported this legislation for a variety of reasons. Communities were concerned about their way of life and knew that good schools would mean good communities. Communities were also concerned about benevolence; they wanted to avoid a social hierarchy that would be exacerbated by the inability of some to pay for a portion of their schooling. Citizens also supported this measure because the money available to support education had been inequitable because 16th-section land values varied. Legislators supported the bill because they were concerned about economic development and preparing people to be good citizens and because they believed education is a right for all.

An unintended consequence of the 1854 law was that it resulted in centralized administration of the schools and loss of local control. William Perry, the first state superintendent of education, was "convinced that the public's schools weren't good schools" and believed in the "absolute necessity of state control." Curriculum and textbooks were determined at the state level, and new rules required county superintendents to report back to the state on the quality of instruction. The state superintendent also decided how the schools should be administered. Many of the decisions that had been made at the community level were now centrally decided.

For more than 50 years, Alabamians made their own arrangements for their children to be educated. Although many argue that public education in Alabama began in 1854 when the state took formal responsibility, the schools in the first half of the 19th century were also public. They were created by citizens in local

communities for the betterment of their children and ultimately the betterment of their neighborhoods. They were funded by voluntary contributions rather than primarily by the state. The beginning of state-supported education may have signaled the shift to believing schools are primarily the realm of government and professionals, and although positive in many respects, it relieved citizens of any responsibility for them. Over time, as generations move forward, the memory of ever having been involved in education has faded.

All of this brings me back to that dusty drive in Baldwin County. What I took away from this project—and a lens I continue to look through today in this work—is the conviction that early schools, whether they were in New York or California, Michigan or Alabama, were created by people who cared about their communities and therefore the education of young people. People have forgotten the early history of public education in the United States. People see education as a service that is provided rather than as something they are a part of. Unfortunately, much of Kettering's research today points to people feeling shut out of the education of young people. They say, "those aren't our schools." But the truth is, at one point, they were intimately theirs. We can't return to a time when individual citizens build the schoolhouse and hire the teacher, of course, but some amount of school ownership seems not only appropriate but also necessary. For many people, educating may be something that primarily happens in schools. And for those who do not have children or whose children are grown, this may be something that doesn't seem all that important. But some people do recognize that education is not just the responsibility of parents and teachers—the whole community must be involved. Historically, this was certainly the case.

Melinda Gilmore is a program officer and senior writer/editor at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at gilmore@kettering.org.

Why Public Schools? Whose Public Schools?

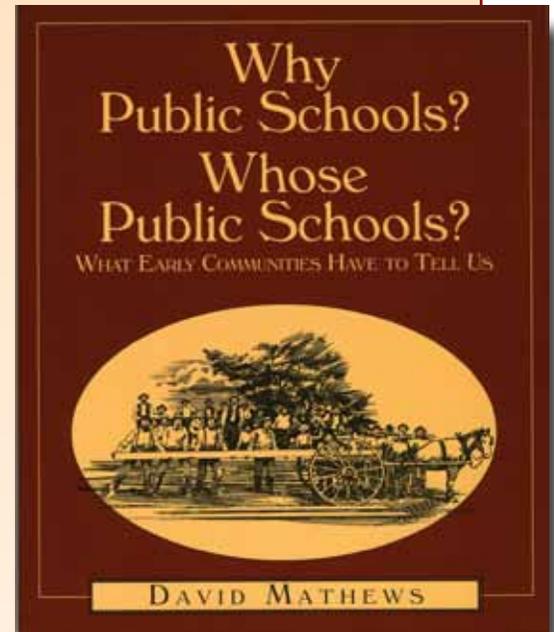
What Early Communities Have to Tell Us

By David Mathews

"Meticulously researched and reasonably argued . . . should be the focus of community discussions not only in Alabama but across the nation."

—Leah Rawls Atkins,
historian

NewSouth Books | 2003
232 pages, illustrations
trade paper \$15.95
hardbound \$27.95



In this book, Kettering Foundation president David Mathews explores how communities once acted together to create public schools. Mathews' search for answers in the past puts today's educational issues in a context that allows insight into our potential as citizens. He addresses serious national questions through a local case study, that of six southwest Alabama counties, which are representative of the development of schools throughout the United States. Fascinating historical research, drawing heavily on archival records, shows how the early public schools emerged out of citizens' hard work and commitment to their communities. By exposing the tightly coupled relationship between communities and their schools, Mathews finds that cooperation and civic involvement are necessary to address the problems they face.

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