

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

CONNECTIONS

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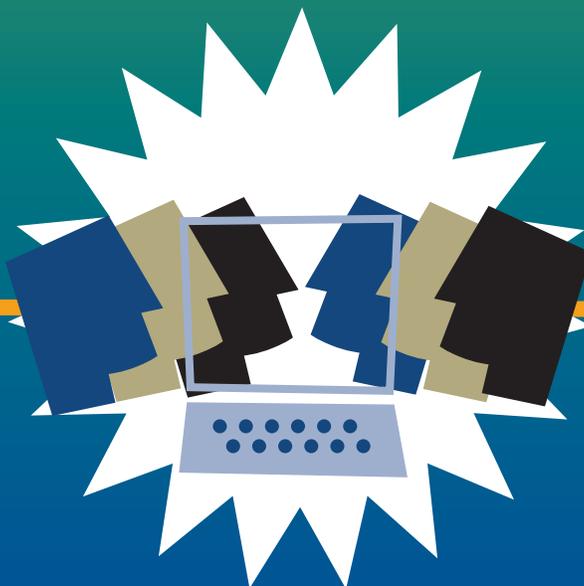
The role of
Civic
Organizations
in today's
society

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By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach



Collaborating *for* Education:

The Dynamic Citizenry

By Connie Crockett

At a community gathering celebrating efforts to reforest the mountains with American chestnuts, a little girl danced before local musicians playing bluegrass. "That little girl is learning she belongs" said an amused observer, content with the support the regional Linefork, Kentucky, community is showing for the ongoing, multigenerational effort involving foresters, grandparents, young people who have struggled in traditional academic settings, and the people who want to see them succeed.

Such efforts are part of what might be called a community strategy for education carried out by people acting as though they were a board of education. Kettering pays attention to what is happening in Linefork because we are interested in knowing more about the circumstances under which citizens find ways to act on problems shared in common, problems for which there are no easy answers and for which no single institution can be held responsible.

To better understand community strategies for education, we've talked to people from many walks of life. We've met with people who work in police departments, health departments, and city governments. We've met with passionate retirees, youth development organizations, alternative school kids, and home-schooling moms. We've been looking for connections people are making between their own individual efforts on behalf of young people and that of a consciously larger public purpose. We've sought out strategic engagement being done by people who, although not elected to school boards, act thoughtfully and collaboratively as a board of education might. What we've found in some cases is the sense that everyone in a given community is linking efforts to help kids find their positive futures. Having a larger sense of purpose makes the people we met in Linefork appear to act like a board of education.

In too many places, community members have abdicated their collective responsibility for education, thinking of it as something that only happens in schools. When things don't go well for young people, most of us still look to schools to make things better rather than looking to ourselves for remedies. If our role as citizens is to wrestle with tough problems together, and education is a primary societal function, then it stands to reason that educational accountability focused solely on schools would weaken democracy by leaving nothing (beyond passing levies) for citizens to do. As Kettering president David Mathews has said, the citizenry that places confidence in an institution is not the same as the public that exercises responsible ownership. Educating children to find their place in society is the work of whole communities. It's what communities can do.

Research by John McKnight of the University of Chicago shows that even communities that don't think they have much going for them have unrecognized or untapped assets. Thinking of education as a lifelong, whole community effort means that, while we support and give schools their due, there is much more that we can offer collectively to build a community where educational opportunities are maximized. Certainly it helps when

Collaborating for Education

schools, the “official” educating institutions in a community, are open to what non-official educators do. Ideally, all who care about children work within a complementary network. When that happens, Kettering notes an alignment of citizens and institutional actors.

We have wondered what conditions might cause a fundamental shift in the working of public institutions like schools that would trigger their closer alignment with a networked community “board of education.” We’re always looking for places where a community consciousness has formed about what people can do, not in perfect concert, but in a practical sense of complementary efforts.

In at least one case, it took a crisis.

Years ago, an unhappy community gathered before the new school superintendent in Houston, Minnesota. The schools were in debt, enrollment was declining, and an unpopular prospect of having to consolidate loomed. It was in this turbulent setting that the new superintendent spoke to remind people that this was their school and, despite the fact that they had no part in creating the financial mess, he wanted their suggestions about necessary budget cuts. His frank opening sparked community members to reconsider a problem usually left to school administrators to solve, and they began to think creatively together. What happened is a remarkable testament to things becoming possible when citizens take responsibility for problems shared in common.

The superintendents’ challenge to residents of Houston led one man to note that, while the community had bike trails, it had no bike shop. He offered to teach young people repair and shop management skills that would enable them to run a small, profitable business. A local pastor noted that he had experience running a print shop, sorely needed in Houston, and that students could be taught to run that operation. Another resident rehabbed old computers so that every home (with or without children) was linked to enhance school/community communications. The school, already teaching computer skills, then branched outward to offer online programs for youth who had dropped out or were being home-schooled. The Minnesota Virtual Academy run by Houston

Public Schools soon enrolled 500 new students, adding revenue and energy to a small district. All of this forward motion created more energy, changing the way people saw themselves and their town. In time, Houston found that it had a whole lot more educators than might be determined from a list of school staff alone.

Only citizens thinking together can map community ideals that pave the way forward. Institutions may act in service to those ideals, but only citizens can decide what *should* be. Citizens coming together to do the work that only citizens can do, such as collaborating for education in ways that might not seem obvious (like opening a bike shop), become a “dynamic” citizenry. They are a flow of unharnessed resources with implications for education, the exercise of citizenship, and the big topic of educational accountability.

As a nation, we’ve spent a lot of time and energy trying to ensure educational accountability. Vast sums have been spent, but these measures haven’t provided the missing ingredient needed to bring about a well-educated citizenry. In places like Houston, Minnesota, people can see for themselves whether young people of the community are engaged because they are coproducers of the town’s educational success story. The schools and the community act in alignment. In Houston, people don’t need to read about test scores to know kids are doing well; they can see it all around them.

But most of us aren’t close enough to, or challenged to be a part of, our communal educational responsibilities and we pay attention to only the most superficial details. Accustomed to reports showing the local results of national school test data, we seem to view widely varying assessments between good schools and those in need of improvement as though it were just another form of healthy competition.

What we need to develop are more authentic local assessments of academic measurement, the kind produced by a dynamic citizenry articulating its ideals

of what should be. What would begin as citizen-to-citizen engagement, an expression of concern, would lead to broader conversations, stronger local communities, and better schools. Recognition and use of local assets would also lead to the development of healthy cross-regional cooperation. And that would be good for small towns and big cities alike. Education seen as community responsibility has the potential to connect our disparate society, as when whole towns turned out for school expositions and spelling bees.

Education is the means through which we find our place in society. It is not the responsibility of schools alone. In

Thinking of education as a lifelong, whole community effort means that, while we support and give schools their due, there is much more that we can offer collectively to build a community where educational opportunities are maximized.

Houston’s story, authentic collaboration was prompted by the superintendent’s challenge. Do you know of other places where education was taken up by the community rather than left up to the schools alone? Every community is a school of some sort. What is your community teaching? Where you live, who are the relevant actors in the social endeavor called education? Kettering would welcome reports not of individuals or single organizations, but of loosely linked networks, groups that fall outside the “usual suspects,” those who do the kind of bridging work that shows they’ve come to see responsibility for education as being widely shared. Kettering might call them a “dynamic citizenry” or a “community board of education,” but you might call them “us.” We’d like to hear from you.

Connie Crockett is a program associate at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at crockett@kettering.org.

**NEW from
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SELECTED WRITINGS OF LI SHENZHI

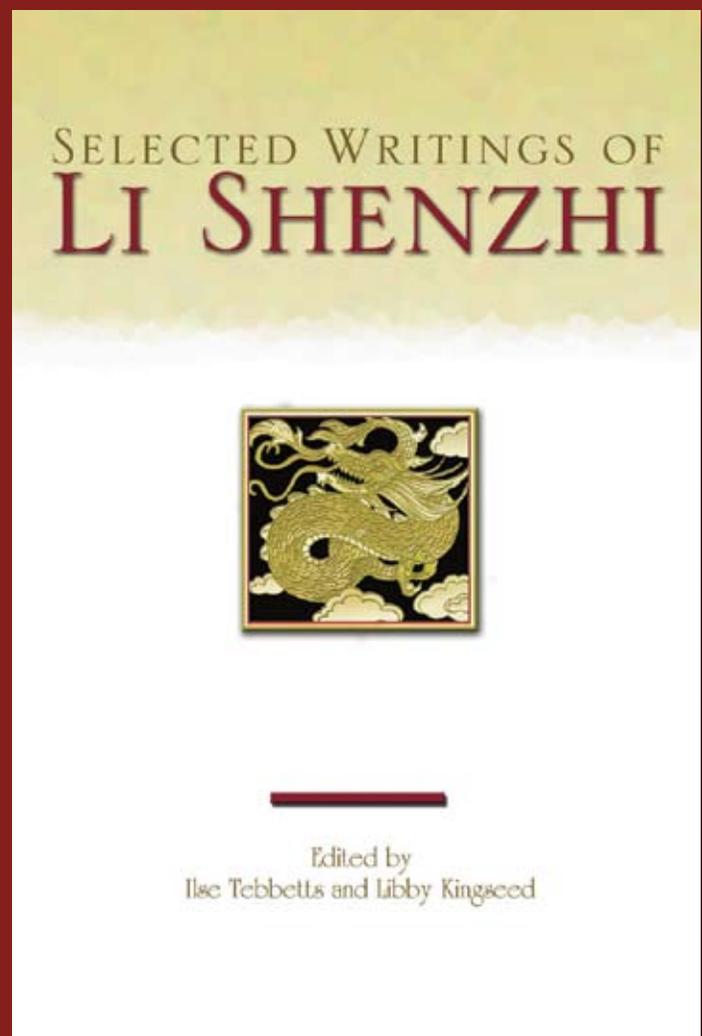
This volume offers the first English translations of work by Li Shen zhi (1923-2003), a leading Chinese statesman and academic, who was a premier architect of China's liberal intellectual revival in the late 1990s and an uncompromising campaigner for political reform and democracy in China.

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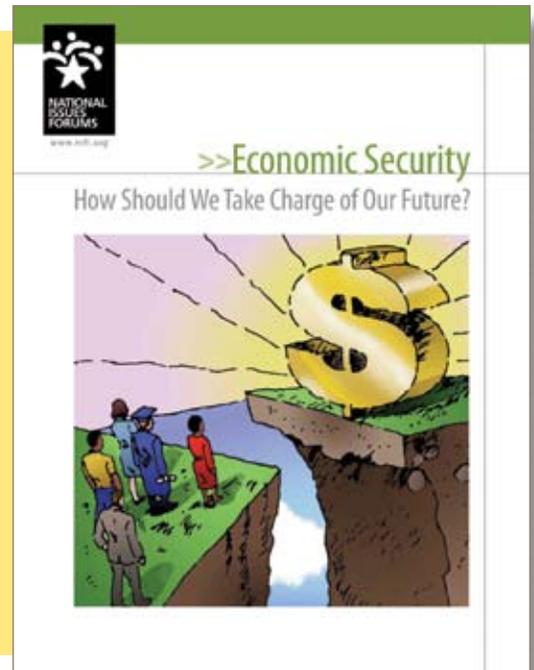
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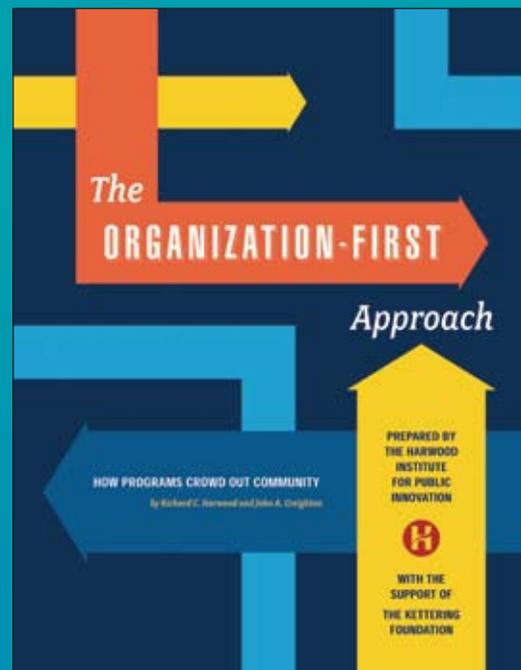
The Organization-First Approach

How Programs Crowd Out Community

by Richard C. Harwood and John A. Creighton

“The Organization-First Approach reveals the troubling trend of nonprofits, foundations, advocacy groups, and others becoming increasingly focused inward, consumed by an ethos of professionalization that leaves little room for authentic engagement or deliberation. The report finds that many of these groups have replaced engagement with outreach and interface with the public around the organization’s programs and agenda instead of the community’s needs or aspirations.”

— David Mathews, President & CEO, Kettering Foundation



Kettering Foundation and the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation | 2009

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Doing Democracy

A report for the Kettering Foundation

by Scott London

Some organizations are reversing the trend toward a decline in civil society by creating the spaces and the means for public deliberation on a wide variety of local, state, and national issues. This report by Scott London describes how many centers across the country are building the capacity of citizens to tackle tough problems. They promote public life in classrooms by developing skills. And they promote public life in communities by encouraging citizens to work to address problems and by affecting the decisions public officials must make.



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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. 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 organization supported by an endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at www.kettering.org.

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