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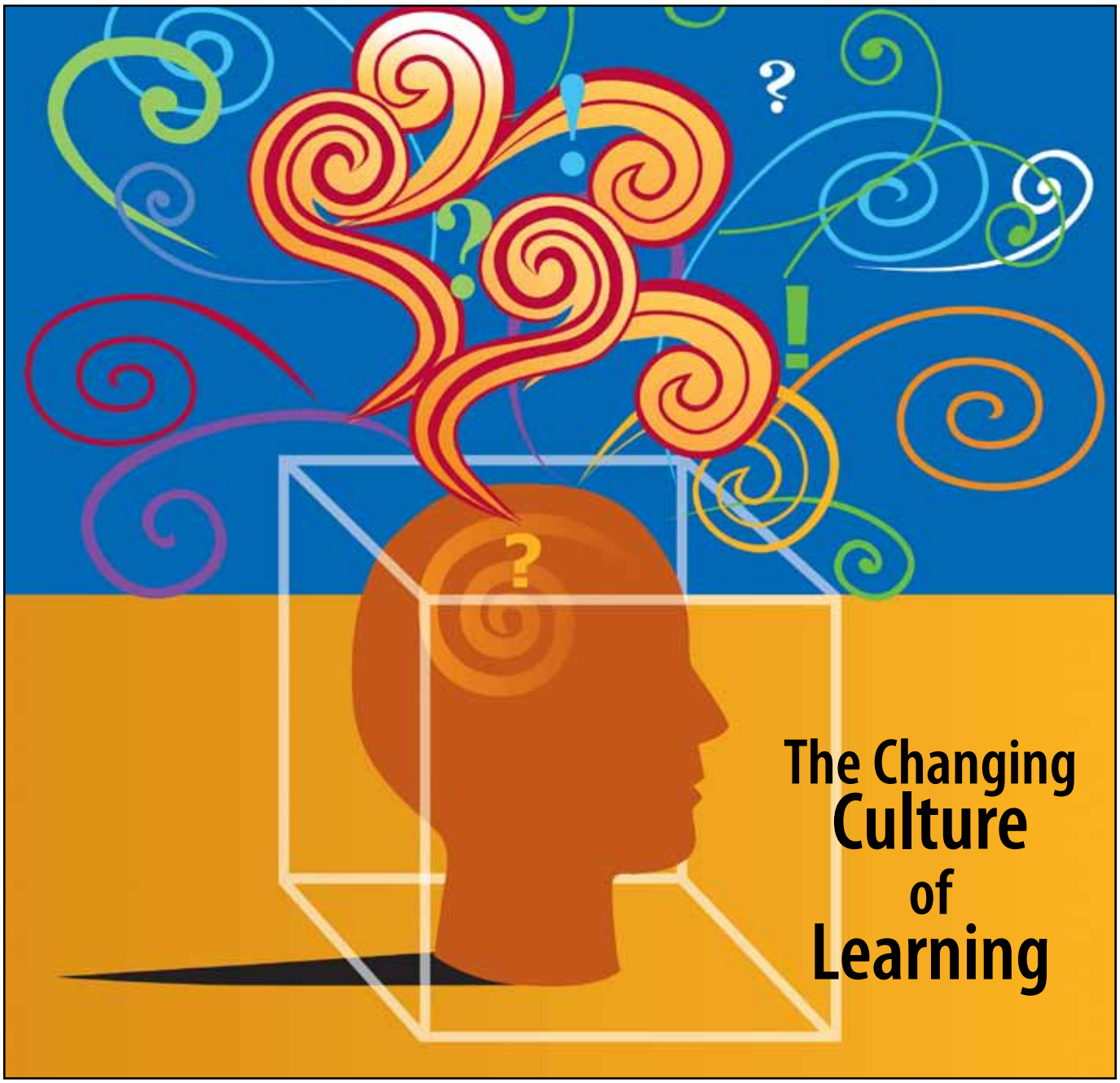
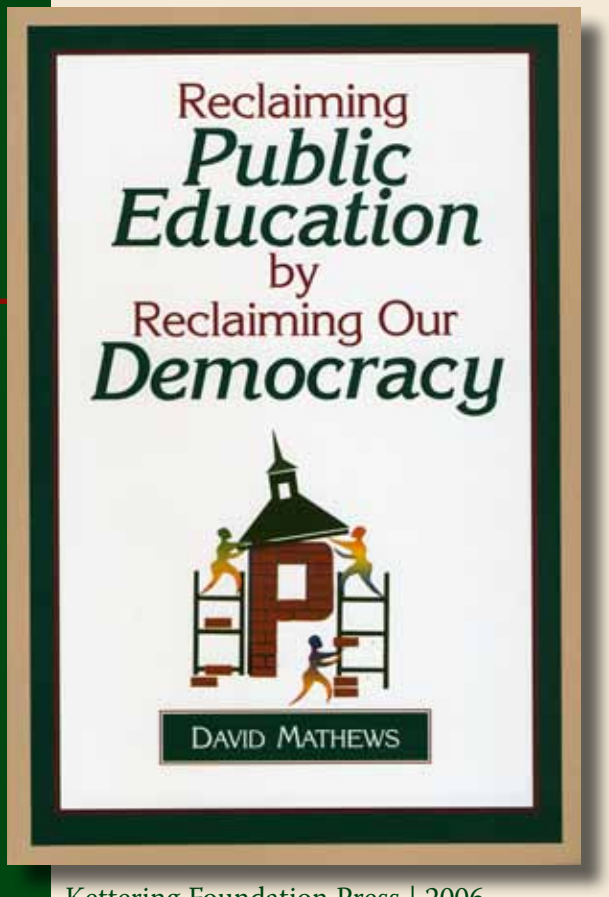


Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy

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 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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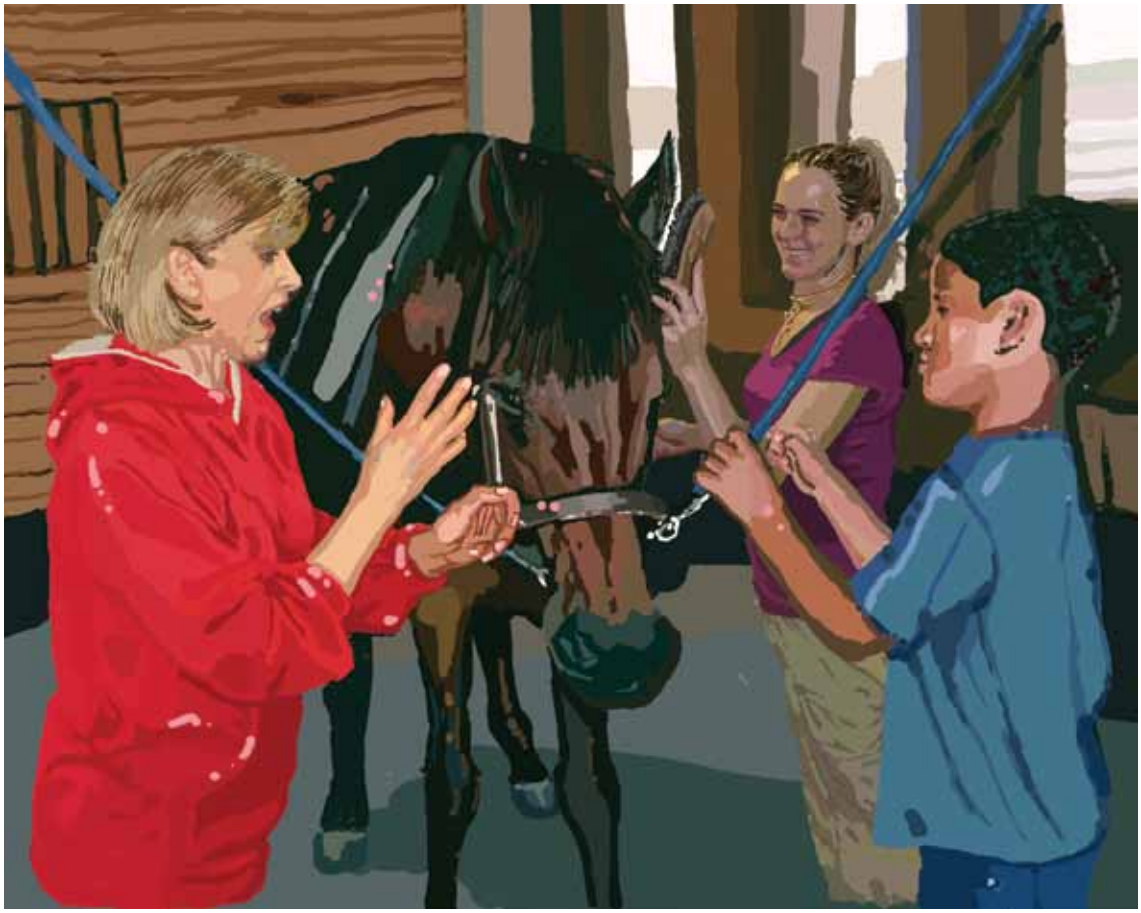

Communities: A Resource

Broadening the Definition of Education

By Patricia Moore Harbour

"Although young people spend much of their time in school, a variety of other community institutions share responsibility for creating the conditions in which young people can succeed."

—Atelia Melaville, Author

As an educator for many years, I remember how much I valued the involvement of parents and community in my work—whether I was a teacher, principal, or assistant superintendent. I mention this because although there were many collaborative activities that my colleagues and I initiated to bring resources into our school, it was limited compared to the greater awareness of available resources and the capacity for learning that the community offers. We saw our work as innovative, but it was still based on the traditional model that schools educate. Today, after-school programs that are led by many citizen educators are changing "who educates" and expanding the meaning of education beyond the schools.

In the school where I taught, parents were involved in classes, the cafeteria, the

library, on the playground with children, helping teachers, and monitoring special learning group activities. Education scholars have said that parent involvement is important for children's performance in school. In that regard we did a good job at Hunters Woods School. Parents invited to the school were called on and asked to assist in special tasks. Many parents volunteered, yet, this was always directed by the school.

In a two-day special teaching/learning experiment multiple high-interest classes were offered for students. Students chose classes based on their interests and followed a rotational schedule. Nearly a hundred different choices were available with a faculty exclusively made up of community members, including business people, parents, homemakers, lawyers, carpenters, photographers, stay-at-home moms, a seamstress, artists, dancers, builders, scientists, a former professional football player, a hair stylist, a gymnast, a drama coach, and many others. The classes were offered by these talented and willing community members for two full days of experiential learning. The community shared its vast resources, which expanded learning way beyond the school's curriculum.

In Timber Lane School, where I was the principal, we expanded our reach even further. Often parent volunteers nearly outnumbered the teachers and staff in the school. These dedicated volunteers, no doubt helped lower the pupil-adult ratio in most classrooms and special classes. Parents were trained by Timber Lane staff to work with students teaching one on one as well as in small groups. They tutored and reinforced math and reading skills. They assisted teachers and students with science and art projects. Students, teachers, and the school benefited. Parents involved knew they were appreciated and made a difference.

Students visited local and national museums, historical sites, the observatory, local farms, and businesses of different occupations and discovered possible careers. Again, we connected outside the school and students benefited.

The school's outreach to use community resources was greater, yet relationships beyond parents were few. For schools, it seemed parents were the community. Only a tangential relationship existed with the larger community. However, local and state service providers and schools did collaborate extensively to meet the special needs of young people.

Of course, during a bond issue campaign the school district reached out to the community-at-large for support. Over the years with growing dissatisfaction with schools, bond issues failed and separation of schools from their communities deepened. In fact, for many school districts various sectors of the community became less available to the schools. This included aging citizens with no children in school and the business sector.

In a large, urban school district, I directed the superintendent's flagship initiative, a vehicle to reengage an alienated business community with the public schools. The superintendent asked businesses not for money, but for their time, skills, and knowledge to strengthen the learning experiences in five key academic and career areas pertinent to the future job market and economic development in the city.

The business community was hands on and provided creative problem solving. They designed and wrote curricula, taught classes, and monitored the progress of each program. They trained and provided teachers with paid internships and students with summer work experiences. The business participants demonstrated a strong sense of ownership and responsibility for these programs. These resources were used both inside and outside schools. An environment for learning was created, encouraging teachers and students to advance their knowledge and experience beyond the traditional textbook curricula.

These programs were designed to create change in the student's academic performance and improve the school district's relationship with the business community. It was established to create a shift in the way education was delivered over the long term. These above examples are shared to point out the value of community resources that has been recognized by citizens, schools, and districts for decades. Yet, the push back continues. Who owns education? The schools? The public/community? How do schools and communities work together to ensure the best of both are available to educate and develop young people?

The scholarly theories and research of thoughtful educators and historians, including John Dewey, Lawrence Cremin, Ronald Edmonds, and recently Edmund Gordon, recapture our attention on the importance of the public's role and responsibility for education. Cremin said education must be thought of "comprehensively, relationally, and publically." To some extent, maybe it can be construed that the three earlier examples briefly touched upon this broader perspective of education. However, today, citizens have expanded access and use of resources more broadly for youth development.

Resources often were discovered in unlikely places. For instance, a horse farmer allowed young people whose needs were not being met in school to work with the horses. These students improved in school and strengthened learning skills through their acquired knowledge and understanding of horses.

In a soon to be published Kettering Foundation report, *A Community Educators Initiative*, participants in the study repeatedly affirm the value added that citizen educators contribute to developing and educating youth. In fact, there is evidence that youth development may inspire community development and change. In the study we learned the most impactful resource is human capital, engaged citizens. We noted how relationships shifted and citizens focused on a shared vision for

youth and their community. Relationships formed across traditional boundaries of separation. Citizens of different races, economic and cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and political persuasion worked together to achieve mutual goals.

We noticed that in most communities, individuals, faith-based, nonprofit, social, and civic organizations initiated and led after-school programs. Although most efforts were not communitywide initiatives, rather, launched by individuals or separate organizations, they engaged others, including schools. Resources often were discovered in unlikely places. For instance, a horse farmer allowed young people whose needs were not being met in school to work with the horses. These students improved in school and strengthened learning skills through their acquired knowledge and understanding of horses. Equally important, these programs demonstrate the value and necessity for public engagement in education. Their success has implications for education reform. Yes, education, not school reform.

Authentic reform, it seems, continues to elude schools. Schools are an important part of the community, not the reverse. Yet the conversation about education always ends up in an emotional interaction about schools. In a democracy, schools are not the sole responsible entity for education. Rather, as an institution within the community, they are collaborators with and for the community. Is it possible that when the community works, then, so do schools? Traditionally, schools were established to reduce privilege among citizens and were designated the source for academic achievement. Community educators develop life skills, provide mentors, nutrition, role models, character development, and numerous resources that support the development of the whole child.

In a democracy, schools are not the sole responsible entity for education. Rather, as an institution within the community, they are collaborators with and for the community. Is it possible that when the community works, then, so do schools?

There was a major observation of these cutting-edge programs that was repeatedly noticed. Participants did not know each other, even those from the same locality and region. Most participants did not communicate with other programs or communities. Does this minimize the availability of resources? This was true of two programs engaged in this work and residing in close proximity to one another. They were located in different cities less than 20 miles apart. Later, after meeting, the two program directors exchanged resources that benefited youth in both groups.

Some of the challenges reported by programs may have limited this kind of peer relationship. One issue was funding. In the survey administered in the study, funding was frequently cited as the biggest obstacle. Additional challenges included the loss of leaders, change of school superintendents, a diminished economy, and recruiting staff and volunteers for the long-term.

A teacher involved in a collaborative initiative between her school and local citizens pointed out an important challenge that inhibits collaboration. Administrators and teachers fear a backlash from community, parents, and students that could further reduce community support, heighten parent flight, or increase tension among students. Fear is definitely a "game stopper" for communication, collaboration, and access to community resources.

Schools and their districts have been consistently under fire since the early 1980s, particularly for issues like safety, low test scores, and accreditation. If we sit in fear and do nothing, nothing will happen, and things will remain the same. The public recognition of its abilities and its available resources to make a difference in the lives of young people may be more significant at this time, than at any other time in recent history.

In the current reality, families, schools, businesses, communities, and grantmakers are economically stressed. Apathy, resignation, and the loss of power to recognize the value of community resources can easily displace the energy and synergy of engaged citizens resolving their own problems.

Even under these difficult circumstances the most vital resource is still there, human capital. Is there any better time to access the creativity, skills, and wisdom of the numerous resources in our communities?

Patricia Moore Harbour is a Kettering Foundation associate. She can be reached at patharbour@harborgroup.org.

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