

# CONNECTIONS

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## Countering Democracy's Challenges

By David Mathews p. 2

## Recasting the Narratives That Shape Our Public Life

By Paula Ellis p. 23

## Being a Civically Engaged College

By Adam Weinberg p. 36



Experiments in  
**DEMOCRATIC  
CITIZENSHIP**

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# CONTENTS

- 2 **Countering Democracy's Challenges**  
David Mathews
- 15 **The Educating Neighborhood:  
How Villages Raise Their Children**  
John McKnight
- 23 **Recasting the Narratives That Shape  
Our Public Life**  
Paula Ellis
- 30 **Park Life: Experimenting with Democracy  
and Civic Engagement in Cincinnati's  
Oldest Public Park**  
David Siders
- 36 **Being a Civically Engaged College That  
Contributes to Democratic Ways of Living:  
Reflections of a College President**  
Adam Weinberg
- 45 **Parents for Public Schools: Encouraging  
Educational Citizenship**  
Joann Mickens
- 51 **Becoming a Catalyst for Civic Learning**  
Betty Knighton
- 59 **Public Deliberation, Historic Decisions,  
and Civic Education: A Journey with a  
Presidential Library**  
Kathleen Pate
- 67 **Science and the Cultivation of Public Judgment**  
Daniel Sarewitz
- 72 **How I Learned What Not to Do as a School  
Superintendent**  
Charles Irish

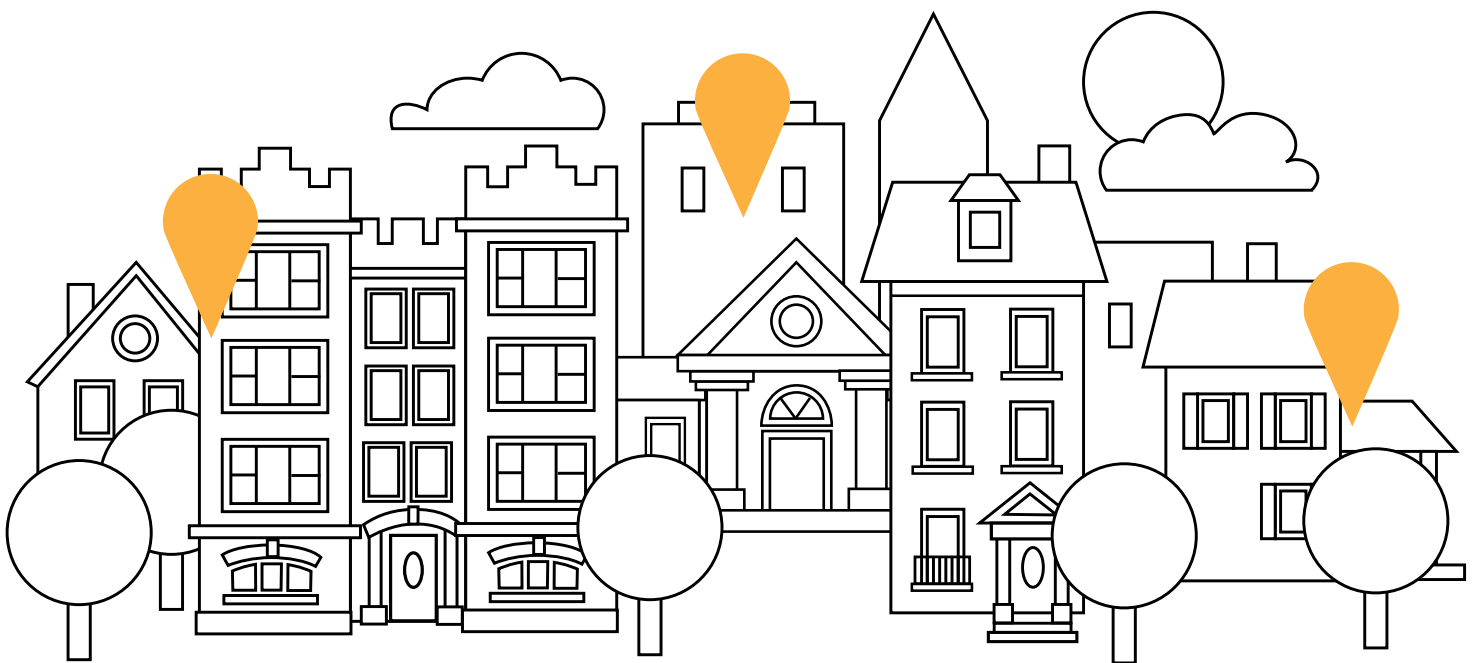
# The Educating Neighborhood: How Villages Raise Their Children

By John McKnight

**T**hroughout North America, one of the most popular mottos is the African saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Hardly anyone disagrees with its

premise. However, there are very few “villages” that actually engage in this practice. Child raising is thought to be largely the domain of families and schools. However, a village is much more than family or school, and holds more educational resources than either.

The educational assets of the village include the knowledge of neighborhood residents; the clubs, groups, and associations that are citizen-based learning environments; and the local institutions (businesses, not-for-profits, and government bodies). They each provide distinct and irreplaceable learning opportunities. It is these neighborhood educational assets that are activated in a village that raises its children. However, in most communities, these invaluable resources are unused and





**The first universally available educational asset is the knowledge local residents hold that they are willing to teach young people.**

disconnected from the lives of young people.

There is a forgotten history of village child raising. In the Asset-Based Community Development Institute's neighborhood research, we have discovered this history by asking people over 50 years of age to describe their experiences in their neighborhoods when they were children. Most of these people respond in a similar fashion. They say that things have changed a great deal. They remember how various people on the block taught them all kinds of things from singing to stamp collecting to bicycle repair to history. They also remember how the people on the block expected them to behave and would tell their parents immediately if they stepped over the neighborhood boundaries.

Finally, they speak of their sense that they were the children of all the people on the block or neighborhood.

When we ask people under the age of 40 to tell us about their childhood neighborhood experiences, we rarely hear the story told by their seniors. Instead their story is about school, youth groups (from Boy Scouts to gangs), and programs. Neighbors have vanished from the story.

It appears that in one to two generations, villages have lost their power to raise children. Their functions have largely been transferred to schools. This transfer is reflected by the fact that in the last generation, schools have been asked to take responsibility for the health, safety, food, recreation, behavior, moral values, and entrepreneurial development of young people. Viewed from the school perspective, these transfers have created teachers who often feel overwhelmed by all of these responsibilities. The transfer of neighborhood functions to the classroom has so distorted the teacher's role that she or he is diminished in capacity to teach those things for which they were prepared—the basic educational curriculum.

The transfer of neighborhood functions to schools has been a lose-lose history. The neighborhood

has become impotent and often angry at the behavior of young people with whom they have lost touch. The school has become overburdened as it attempts to be an all-purpose child raiser that fails at this impossible task. As a result, school-neighborhood tensions are increased as schools try to respond by getting parents to support the school rather than seeking neighborhood initiatives that would result in the village restoring those functions.

The resolution of this school-neighborhood dilemma depends upon identifying and mobilizing the educational capacities of the residents, associations, and institutions in the neighborhood. Surprisingly, every neighborhood is rich with these educational resources. However, very few communities are organized to identify and connect these resources to young people. A village with the capacity to raise children must first be able to identify the three most important teaching resources in the neighborhood.

## **THE KNOWLEDGE OF LOCAL RESIDENTS**

The first universally available educational asset is the knowledge local residents hold that they are willing to teach young people.

We have been engaged in research assisting people in local neighbor-

hoods to identify the local teaching knowledge. One example of this knowledge was documented in a low-income African American neighborhood in Chicago. The local neighborhood organization initially met with 17 residents residing on 3 local blocks. They asked the residents what they knew well enough to teach local young people and whether they would be willing to do that teaching without pay. The accompanying table demonstrates the teaching knowledge that these residents were willing to freely share with their village young people.

It is notable that the neighbors can teach some traditional school topics, but of even more significance, they can teach subjects that would not usually be taught in the school, such as vocational skills, moral values, constructive relationships, financial economic skills, self-esteem, recreation, and so on. In “teaching” these kinds of subjects, the neighborhood is recovering its function as child raiser. The school is relieved of functions and can even receive assistance from neighbors in supplementing typical school topics.

While there is great value in all the possible adult connections to their young neighbors, connecting youth to the village’s skills and vocational learning opportunities is an important resource for changing

## Teaching Knowledge of 17 Residents of 3 Blocks in Chicago's Woodlawn Neighborhood



Banking skills  
Basic accounting  
Economics  
Entrepreneurship



Physical fitness  
First aid  
Skating  
Real estate skills



Job creation  
Job training  
Marketing  
Raising a credit score  
Computer technology



Reviewing a credit report  
Being a good neighbor  
Basic etiquette  
Hygiene



Beginning journalism  
Homeschooling  
Reading comprehension  
Mathematics



Breastfeeding techniques  
for new moms  
Cooking  
Nutrition  
Self-esteem



Grammar  
English  
Handcrafting  
Knitting  
Sewing



Public speaking  
Presentational etiquette  
Event planning  
Strategic planning  
Youth life skills

life futures by connecting what young people want to learn with what neighbors want to teach.

### NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS

The second educational asset in neighborhoods is the clubs, groups, organizations, and associations to

which the local residents belong. These are usually smaller face-to-face groups where the members do the work and they are not paid.

We have done research with local neighborhood groups helping them identify their local associations. There are always many more than local people realize. One example is

the town of Spring Green, Wisconsin, with a population of 1,600. A team of residents was able to identify 82 associations and to interview the leaders of 60 associations.

The associations involve a diversity of neighborhood, civic, vocational, environmental, and social interests. The study found that the leaders identified “learning” as the most common reason that people join these associations. They are not only topical learning opportunities, but also provide invaluable social relationships that build trust—both qualities that every youth would learn to their advantage if they were connected to one or more associations.

The 60 associational leaders were given a list of various kinds of neighborhood improvement functions that are often fulfilled by local associations. Of particular significance is the fact that 34 groups say they are now involved with youth while 12 indicate that they would probably become involved if asked. When asked whether they are involved with “youth at risk,” 12 groups report that they are while 14 more say they are probably willing if asked. Many associations are in some way involved with young people and many more could be engaged if they were asked. This makes clear the largely unrecognized contributions and possibilities of local associations as teaching/learning venues.

Special note should be made of the research that emphasizes the importance of young people being connected with adults in order to develop their vocational, civic, and moral values. Local associations are the most readily available opportunities for young people to establish adult relationships in a productive setting that can develop their gifts and capacities as citizens.

### LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

The third neighborhood educational resource is the local institutions—businesses, not-for-profits, and government institutions that include libraries, parks, schools, and museums. These local institutions have



**Local associations are the most readily available opportunities for young people to establish adult relationships in a productive setting that can develop their gifts and capacities as citizens.**



been widely recognized as learning resources by universities and high schools with community service programs. These programs place students with the institutions in order to broaden their knowledge beyond traditional school topics. These kinds of student-institution relationships have many benefits, including specific vocational knowledge, relationships with productive adults, networking opportunities, understanding norms of a workplace, creative and entrepreneurial experiences, and activities that build self-esteem.

In addition to these institutional relationships, students can also be connected to other adults who are performing productive institutional activities. An example would be students who are paired with the mayor and elected council people, directors of government departments, hospital administrators, foundation staff, police officials, and entrepreneurs of all kinds. These experiences, in addition to providing wonderful learning opportunities, also increase the commitment of young people to their neighborhood and its civic life.

## **ACTIVATING AN EDUCATING NEIGHBORHOOD**

In many places, a common description of a local community is that it is a “welcoming neighborhood.” A

related definition would be an “educating neighborhood”—a place where all of the learning assets of individuals, associations, and institutions are identified and mobilized to create a village that raises its children. There are at least three steps that lead to an educating neighborhood:

### *1. Partners in Education*

The organization for carrying forward the vision of an educating neighborhood includes as many educating partners as possible. These partners can include neighborhood associations, other interested associations, the library, the local newspaper, the community foundation, the local government, the chamber of commerce, and the school.

This Neighborhood Education Partnership is best achieved if its members are not only visionaries but also representative of the three kinds of educational resources that must become activated if the educating neighborhood is to be mobilized.

### *2. Identifying a Neighborhood's Educational Resources*

In many neighborhoods, the “village” is not raising the children because the local educational assets are not visible. An initial goal of the Neighborhood Education Partnership is to make visible the invisible resources and to identify their willingness to take on a neighborhood education role.

## Three Steps That Lead to an Educating Neighborhood



**1 Establish a Neighborhood Education Partnership**—associations and institutions mobilized to create a village that raises its children.



**2 Identify the neighborhood's educational resources**—teaching knowledge and willingness to become an educational resource.



**3 Connect the educational resources**—develop methods that connect them to young people.

This “visibility” could include identifying 1) the teaching knowledge of residents in the neighborhood; 2) the associations in the neighborhood and their willingness to become an educational resource; and 3) the array of institutions and their willingness to join in the educating process. This undertaking can be done by the partners, sometimes in cooperation with local colleges and agencies.

While thus far we have focused on the role of adults teaching young people, it is equally important that this visibility initiative also seek to understand the skills, abilities, and interests that young people are prepared to contribute to neighborhood life. In this sense, people of all ages

become educating assets—everyone a teacher and everyone a learner.

When this “map” of the abundant educational resources is made public, it usually leads to a new vision of the neighborhood, its strengths, and its educating possibilities.

### *3. Connecting the Educational Resources*

Once the Neighborhood Education Partnership has identified the vast array of educational resources, the next step is to develop methods that connect them to young people. This function could be performed by a staff of the partnership. It might also be a significant function of the partners themselves. The local newspaper and college could also be an implementing resource. The task is to

weave young people into the fabric of the adult community so that they can learn and also become contributors to the neighborhood's life.

### LEARNING TO SUPPORT FUNCTIONING NEIGHBORHOODS

In recent years, several leaders of institutions and professionals have realized that they will not be able to fulfill their goals if the neighborhood is not organized to fulfill its unique functions.

Professionals in the health field have been active for years in energizing local neighborhoods to undertake health-giving activities because they know that medical care is a very limited tool for improving health.

In many communities, police leadership have become clear about their limits in dealing with crime. They

have developed community policing as a method to support neighborhood organizations that will take on functions providing security that police cannot begin to provide.

Many elected officials and department heads understand that unless local neighborhoods are organized to take on productive functions, the city or town will decline. They know that local government has clear limits of its capacity to create safe, healthy, economically sound neighborhoods. Without organized productive citizen action, the government will fail.

It is much less clear that school professionals understand what health, police, and municipal officials see so clearly. Often, they are still trapped in a paradigm in which the school dominates the field of education. However, this is a new educational era. Villages must recover their capacities to raise children if schools are to become all that they can be. An effective school of the future will be a partner in that neighborhood recovery. When that recovery is achieved, the village will be able to say, "These are our children. We care for and educate them. Our school is our best ally as we pioneer the new work of becoming a village raising our children." ■



**This is a new educational era. Villages must recover their capacities to raise children if schools are to become all that they can be.**

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