

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

# CONNECTIONS

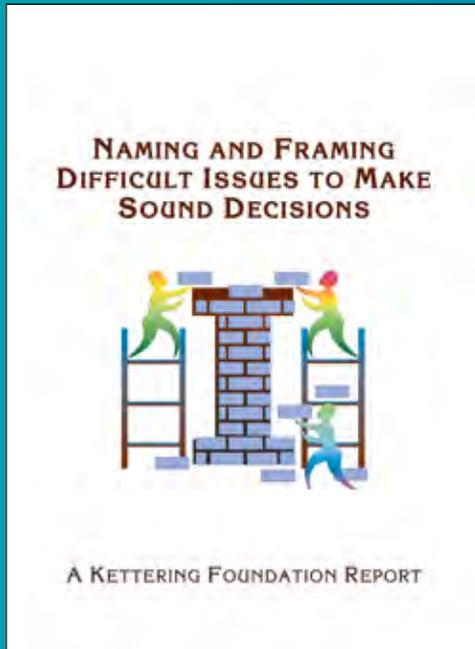
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2013

**CITIZENS**  
in  
Democratic  
Politics



## ADDITIONAL READING FROM KETTERING FOUNDATION



### Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions

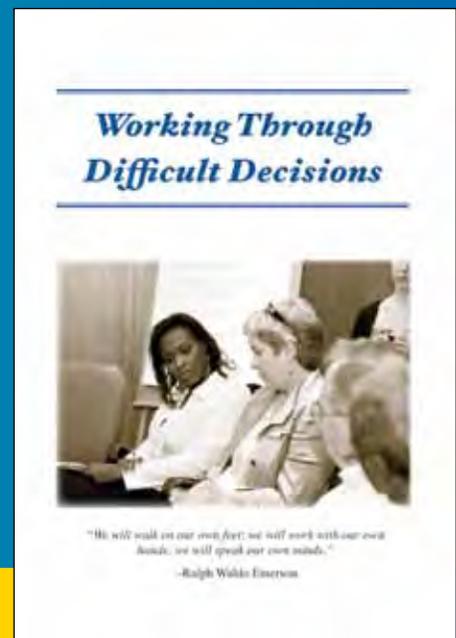
*Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions* is a report for people who want a stronger hand in shaping their collective future and recognize that this requires working through disagreements on what the future *should* be. Replacing an earlier publication, *Framing Issues for Public Deliberation*, this booklet incorporates the foundation's latest insights on how people can describe problems and present different ways to address them so as to encourage sound judgments and avoid immobilizing polarization.

Kettering Foundation | 2011  
**FREE** | 24 pages

### Working Through Difficult Decisions

*Working Through Difficult Decisions* is a brochure for people interested in helping their communities work through their most challenging problems and for anyone interested in moderating forums based on National Issues Forums materials. The brochure speaks to how people can move beyond disagreements to arrive at shared and reflective judgments.

Kettering Foundation | 2011  
**FREE** | 12 pages



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The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what makes democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

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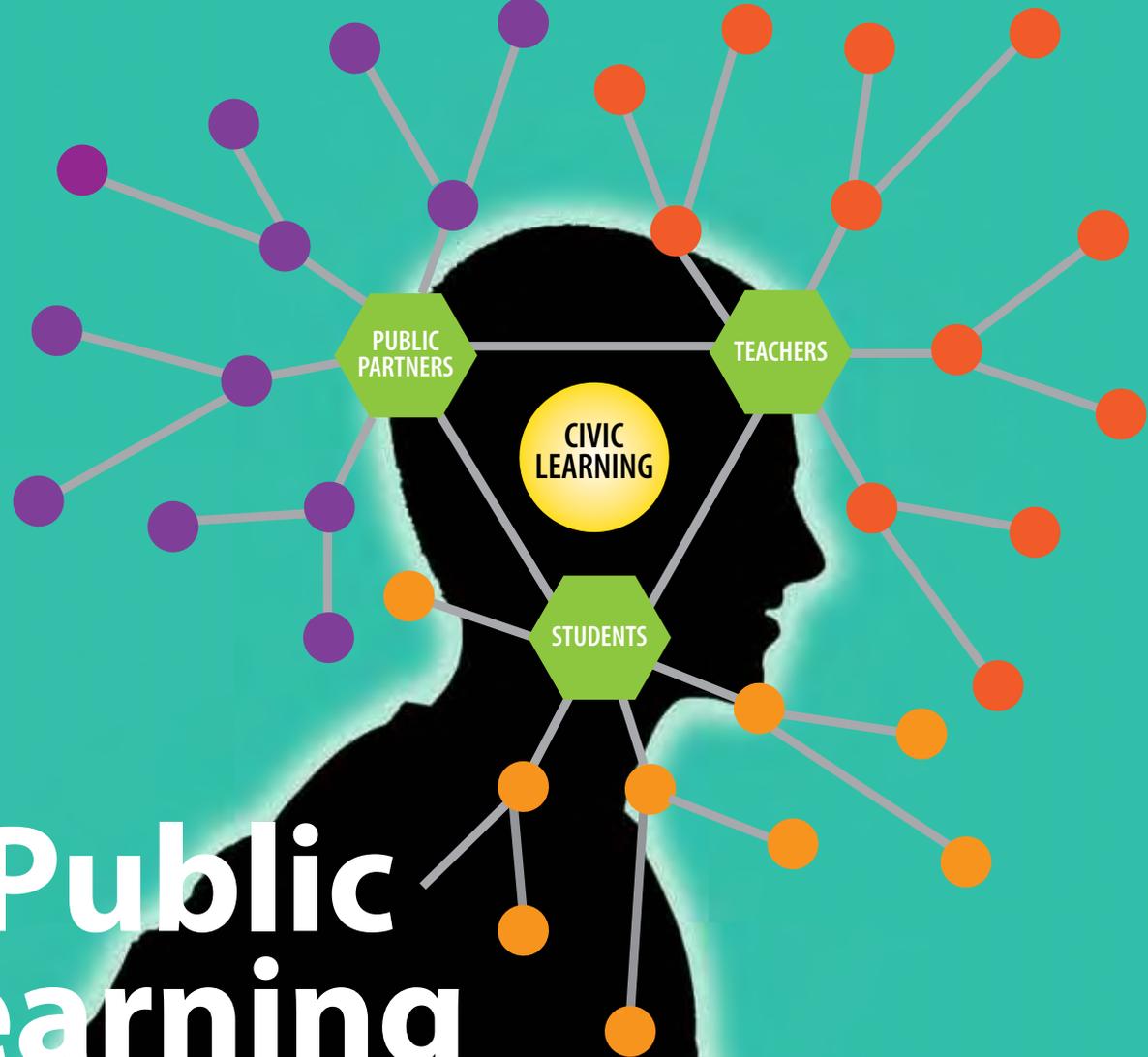
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## CONTENTS



- 4 **Getting Off the Sidelines and Making Good Choices**  
*David Mathews*
- 8 **Deliberative Opportunities in Everyday Political Talk**  
*Amy Lee and Erika Mason-Imbody*
- 12 **Public Deliberation from the Jury Room to Initiative Elections**  
*John Gastil*
- 15 **Issue Guides and Issue Frameworks**  
*Brad Rourke*
- 18 **Learning Exchanges with Centers for Public Life**  
*Alice Diebel and Randall Nielsen*
- 22 **A Public Voice: A Long-Running Experiment Bears Promising Fruit**  
*David Holwerk*
- 24 **Reinventing Hampton**  
*Connie Crockett*
- 26 **Learning Exchanges with Professional Organizations**  
*Phillip D. Lurie*
- 28 **Public Learning in Public Schools:  
How Networks of Teachers and Public Partners Can Support Civic Learning**  
*Stacie Molnar-Main, with Libby Kingseed*
- 31 **Active Citizenry in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia:  
A Case of Citywide Deliberation, Collective Acting, and Civic Capacity Building**  
*Germán Ruiz and Ileana Marin*
- 34 **Online Deliberative Decision Making**  
*Amy Lee*
- 37 **Folk Politics**  
*Randall Nielsen*



# Public Learning *in* Public Schools:

## How Networks of Teachers and Public Partners Can Support Civic Learning

*Stacie Molnar-Main,  
with Libby Kingseed*

**S**ome citizens may wish to build bridges between the types of learning our communities need to solve problems and the learning that occurs in our public schools, but it is difficult to know where to start. Indeed, this was one of my concerns when I first joined a Kettering Foundation research exchange focused on civic education. I had spent much of 2004 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, working alongside teachers who were exploring ways of using National Issues Forums (NIF) issue guides and deliberation in their classrooms. After a promising year of engaging students with NIF, I had expected teachers to seek out additional opportunities for integrating public issues and deliberation in their classrooms. Yet three years after our work together, little evidence of public deliberation could be found in the

## Public Learning in Public Schools

school. In part, this was because many of the staff involved in the project were reassigned to other schools or had accepted positions in other school districts.

Was this a failed experiment in linking education and community issues, or are schools just resistant to the type of work deliberation demands? While it is tempting to answer yes to both questions, I believe such a response overlooks the important work done in Lancaster and, more recently, in other communities across the United States.

Several years later, I am still involved in Kettering's ongoing research on civic education. My colleagues in this research have been able to sustain and deepen their work with deliberative decision making in ways that reinforce connections between communities and their public schools. Through rich conversations with these educators, I have come to recognize how an education rooted in deliberative decision making can transform classrooms, pedagogical practices, and participants' lives. These transformations have not occurred among teachers in isolation or as the result of a single dynamic professional development experience. Changes have occurred, over time, as a result of intentional relationships among educators and citizens committed to exploring potential uses of deliberative practices in classrooms and communities.

In retrospect, I learned a great deal in Lancaster about the potential for classroom deliberation to connect learning in schools with problems facing communities. Our efforts demonstrated how public deliberation can be used across disciplines to support civic learning, while also supporting higher-order thinking and engagement among students.

More recently, through the work of regional teachers' networks—in Birmingham, Alabama; Wausau, Wisconsin; State College, Pennsylvania; and communities on Long Island, New York—diverse groups of people (including practicing teachers, retired educators, school board members, community organizers, and university staff) have come together in Kettering research exchanges to expand their understanding of classroom deliberation. Teachers' institutes associated

with these networks have created ongoing opportunities for K-12 teachers to come together to talk, learn about, and practice deliberation with an emphasis on teachers' authentic interests and needs. In the school systems associated with the teachers' institutes, teachers and students have been able to deepen their work with deliberative decision making over time. This transformation has involved a multiple-year effort to integrate deliberation into school curricula and a sustained engagement between teachers and professional learning partners committed to nurturing networks focused on deliberative decision making and educators' practice-based needs.

Many of the educators I speak to have a difficult time imagining a classroom where students learn and practice deliberative decision making. Some educators question whether general education students can engage in the complex social and intellectual processes that deliberation demands. Others are worried that including public issues and deliberation in their classrooms may limit teachers' ability to cover important content and skills, especially those assessed on state tests.

In the nearly 10 years that I have spent working with K-12 teachers who are using NIF, I have encountered few examples of teachers who report that their students could not deliberate. I have also observed many rich examples of deliberation enhancing instruction and enriching teachers' coverage of core content. This was the case in Lancaster, where high school teachers integrated the study of public issues into several classes and hosted forums in which students deliberated about end of life care. In the week leading up to forums conducted in grade-level groups, classes were abuzz with questions like: What is the meaning of a "good life"? What does the US Bill of Rights suggest about the right to die? And what are limitations of science for solving human problems? In order to answer these questions, students read and interacted with many different kinds of texts: an NIF issue book, a popular biography, the Bill of Rights, the Hippocratic Oath, and media accounts of the contemporary case of Terri Schiavo before the US Supreme Court.

When classroom forums were held, students deliberated about a difficult and often taboo issue with great interest and maturity. In social studies and English classes, students were eager to share their thoughts and experiences and were quick to adopt an analytical mind-set when asked to consider the strengths of others' perspectives and potential consequences of various actions. Gifted students and struggling learners engaged together in powerful conversations that revealed their command of factual information and knowledge rooted in each person's unique lived experience. Students' emotional and intellectual engagement with the issue provided a bridge that supported rigorous application of academic standards.

Based on the reports of educators involved in teacher networks, I have concluded that a single experience with deliberation is not enough to transform classroom practice. Initially, many teachers experience deliberation simply as a new approach to classroom discussion or as a tool to enhance disciplinary learning. However, as teachers remain engaged in teacher networks and receive support from network convenors, their understanding of the role of deliberation in the classroom and in the community changes. Sara Schneck teaches at a Wausau charter school for students considered at-risk of dropping out of school. For four years, she has participated in teachers' institutes convened by the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service. When asked why she continues to use deliberative practices in her teaching, Schneck talks about how it has affected her students' abilities to work with others, across perceived differences. She describes her students' experiences in this way:

After the forum, now I don't see you as a girl who stares me down every day. Now you're someone at the locker I chat with or we're eating lunch together. And that's the forming of a relationship. It changes kids. It forms these new relationships and then they can move on to other places.

## Public Learning in Public Schools

Other teachers, like James Gilmartin of West Islip High School on Long Island, use deliberation in their classrooms because it changes how students view and approach public issues in their lives. According to Gilmartin, a participant in Hofstra University's network, students "become more aware . . . they really start to become critical thinkers in regard to understanding what sources are, and biases, and analyzing where they get their information, whether that information is whole." This type of critical engagement, combined with a willingness to work across differ-

Effects of National Issues Forums (NIF) on High School Students," which concluded that those students who experience deliberation using NIF in the classroom are more apt than other students to reframe issues that are presented to them and advocate for the inclusion of citizens in public decision making.

While the impact of deliberation on student learning is notable, teachers' networks that focus on linking deliberation to classroom practice can lead to important changes in how young people and adults interact with each other in both schools

and communities. On Long Island, for example, teachers associated with the Hofstra teacher network, their students, and fellow citizens, participated in the Deepening Democracy Project during the months surrounding the 2012 presidential election. As part of this initiative, more than 100 deliberative forums were held throughout the community on issues, such as the national debt, immigration, and bullying. According to the project's assistant director, Etana Jacobi, about half of the deliberative forums were held in local schools and half were held in local libraries. The forums not only provided students a seat at the table in discussing important national issues but also raised awareness among youth and adults of students' capacities to

engage as citizens. After a forum on the national debt, a Long Beach high school student commented, "This was the first time I got to hear this is actually an open issue looking for a solution. The only times we've talked about it, I've been talked at and not spoken with." Newspaper and blog accounts of the project publicized the perspectives of youth, presented the students as citizens, and opened doors for continued youth civic engagement. This

contrasts with media portrayals, which often mischaracterize youth as politically disengaged or disaffected.

So what does it take to build bridges between the types of learning our communities need to solve problems and the learning that occurs in our public schools? Stated simply, I believe it takes networks of citizens and educators working together to ensure that real-life public problems are studied in schools and students have the opportunity to engage in deliberative decision making. This is not something most educators can do alone. According to Peggy Sparks, convenor of the Birmingham NIF in the Classroom Leadership Team, bringing deliberation to public schools requires collaboration. The Birmingham teacher network includes more than 40 educators from 2 different school districts, supported by Sparks, local school administrators, a community coalition, university and business partners, and a local history center. In describing the work of this group, Sparks highlights the benefits of having school-community partnerships focused on supporting the use of deliberation with youth:

We have learned that it is mutually beneficial to work together in exchanging services and providing teacher support. Each group has blended their mission, goals and objectives while allowing others to maintain their own identity as we build consensus and build community. Partners, who contribute their resources and reputations, increase the visibility, credibility and sustainability of deliberative democracy in our classrooms.

More simply put, Sparks reports, "We have achieved greater results together than any one of us could have alone." This is possibly the greatest lesson I have learned from working with the NIF teacher networks. While many claim it takes a village to raise a child; I now believe it also takes a village to build and sustain opportunities for democratic deliberation in public schools.

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ences, can lead to powerful civic outcomes. Long-term participants in teacher institutes have reported many notable examples of student learning, including an increased interest in politics and public issues, a desire to understand others' perspectives, and improved listening, oral communication, and problem-solving skills. These observations are consistent with the research findings of John Doble and Lara Peng's 1999 study, "The Enduring



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