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Public Education as Community Work

Connie Crockett, Phillip D. Lurie, and Randall Nielsen

The foundation’s interest in public education begins, as all of its research does, with the responsibilities of citizens in democracy. As citizens, people need to be willing and able to shape the futures of their communities. That requires the ability to shape the education of their communities’ youth. What enables people and community organizations to recognize their ability to educate and to put their resources to use? What opens schools to the complementary production of education in the community?

Program officers Connie Crockett, Phil Lurie, and Randall Nielsen recently shared their recollections of the history of Kettering research into the education of youth. What were the critical problems and insights along the way?

Phil Lurie: Today, it is widely recognized that people are frustrated by the lack of influence they have on the public schools. However, there seems to be little recognition of the potential that exists in the resources outside of schools that could reinforce the work of schooling.

Randall Nielsen: That is what makes the study of the politics of education such a vital part of the foundation’s overarching study of how to make democracy work as it should. The challenges that people face in bringing their collective resources to complementary work in the education of youth are fundamental problems of democracy.

PL: In public policy, and in studies of education, the challenge remains quite narrowly defined. Generally the problem is seen as understanding how people can be more influential in the administration of schools.

Connie Crockett: And how to get people to support the schools, somewhat without question. It is interesting to recall that the foundation’s alternative emphasis on the whole picture of an educating ecology emerged pretty early on at Kettering.

The History of the Study of Education at Kettering

RN: Education has been a fundamental interest for the Kettering Foundation since its inception in 1927. For Charles F. Kettering, the interest was driven by a practical recognition of a relationship between democracy and a culture of widespread inventiveness, which he saw as the key to long-run prosperity. He saw inventiveness as “nothing but a state of mind—a friendly, welcoming attitude toward change.” To be open to change is to be open to learning.

CC: Change is unsettling, but it is a fact of life. Kettering chose to take on some of the toughest problems in engineering. I wonder if he realized that the attitudes people have toward openness to the unfamiliar is a political problem?

RN: Recall that in the 1920s authoritarian regimes were on the rise around the world. Kettering saw this as a result of

The foundation relinquishes most of its conventional grant-giving functions and instead begins to focus on the development of new enterprises charged with examining the compelling needs of society.
political inability to deal constructively with the social and cultural pressures caused by the Industrial Revolution. Democratic society required people to be innovative and adaptive to the changes that resulted from innovation. Both of those capacities would require forms of education that developed and sustained a culture of learning.

CC: So, from the beginning, the foundation’s research was designed as an exploration of three interrelated areas: science and technology, education, and political governance. The fundamental question that linked the three areas of research was how the citizenry could govern, with a “friendly welcoming attitude toward change.”

PL: In a quite different way, change has become the de facto mode of operation in school administration, what with the constant efforts aimed at reform. However, it’s been inventiveness and change for change’s sake.

RN: Based on his own experiences, Kettering felt that the conventional protocols of schooling reinforced the natural human tendency to be discouraged when trying something new. In school, Kettering said, “if we failed once, we were out. In contrast, all research work is 99.9 percent failure and if you succeed once you are in.” To progress in any worthwhile initiative, “we must learn to fail intelligently so that we won’t become discouraged at 99.9 percent failure.” He was keen to discover ways that the protocols of schooling could be aligned with the idea of learning through “failing successfully.”

CC: To that challenge, Kettering was involved in inaugurating cooperative education at the University of Cincinnati in 1906. He helped to establish the cooperative plan at Antioch College, at the General Motors Institute, and at the Northwestern Institute of Technology. He was also active on behalf of the cooperative plan at the Thomas Alva Edison Foundation, of which he was president. Early Kettering efforts were mindful of this way of learning in explorations that integrated classroom teaching with practical experiences outside of the school environment.

PL: The key point is that the underlying recognition—that education includes more than schooling and technical training—was always a fundamental premise of the Kettering Foundation’s research.

In my opinion, an ounce of experimentation is worth a pound of untried theory.”

CHARLES F. KETTERING

Public Education as Community Work

June 1969
The foundation sponsors the Kettering Conference on Public Television, which brings together 65 people from all aspects of public television. The foundation’s interest lies in the broad issue of mass communication programming.

1970
The foundation funds the United Nations Association World Youth Assembly and the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs, expanding its International Affairs programming.

17/DE/A/ develops Individually Guided Education (IGE) in 125 schools, with more than 60,000 students involved in the program.
The Focus on Community

RN: Those early studies of cooperative education focused on experiments in higher education. But the general insight that education is more than schooling resonated with the work of other thinkers, like John Dewey and Kettering board member Lawrence Cremin, who were studying public schooling and the education of youth from a democratic perspective. As time went on, the foundation expanded its scope to explore the roles and functions of public schools in municipalities around the country. In 1984, findings from a series of studies were reported in what became a classic book, John Goodlad’s *A Place Called Schools*.

PL: It seems that the notion that schools function within, and are a product of, their communities (or municipalities) was increasingly recognized in the early 1980s. The *A Nation at Risk* report, however, led to an increased emphasis on reforms singularly focused on the administration of schooling. And Kettering was active in that conversation. The foundation’s Institute for Development of Educational Activities (I/D/E/A) became widely known for the innovations it produced in the administration of schooling.

CC: In the mid-1980s, the foundation began a series of studies that explored a different perspective: the nature of the relationships around education in communities across the United States. The research did not study schooling. Instead it was focused on people who were not professionally employed by school districts. How do citizens understand their roles in the challenge of educating young people, how do they understand their communities, and how do they see the public schools in that context? What would it take for people to see schools as assets of their community?

RN: In 1996, the foundation published an interim report on that research in the book, *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* by David Mathews. The key insight was that the widely documented frustrations about schools could be seen as a symptom of larger phenomena. People increasingly sensed that the basic challenges that defined their lives, including the education of their children, were out of their control. It wasn’t about schools alone. It was about the need to see ways that they could do things, together with others in the places where they lived, that mattered.

CC: In that context, the growing tendency to focus on the schools as the singular means of education was tragically misguided. People were searching for ways to be more constructive actors in education and to have the work they did recognized. Instead they were getting more and more data on what schools were doing.

The Perspective of Professionals

PL: Community-based groups that we worked with recognized this early on, and most ended up working on education-related issues. But most public policy analysts and schools of education never picked up on this distinction. Instead they focused on ways to provide parents—seen as consumers—with more informed choice in schooling.

CC: Right. The problem was that people increasingly felt disconnected from each other in the shared challenges of education of youth. But the response from the education professionals was to work on their own public engagement practices, which focused on how to better engage people in things the schools do. That meant that the public engagement “movement” didn’t affect the fundamental challenge, which is how citizens can...
reclaim their role in public education as part of the larger challenge of improving the way they work with one another in their communities.

PL: Moreover, while we saw a fundamental change in the education reform movement with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which shifted the focus from educational inputs to educational outcomes, the underlying emphasis remained on professionals and institutions, leaving little if no role for citizens as actors.

RN: Yes, the accountability movement has been a fascinating example of the practical impact of the failure to recognize education as the work of communities of people. As people were encouraged to see themselves as consumers rather than co-producers of education, political support for ways to hold school professionals accountable naturally grew. But in the early 2000s, we did a series of studies showing how quickly that could change. We found that when people carefully considered the challenges of education in the context of their communities, they would rename the challenge in ways that implicated themselves and others as actors. It happened naturally. And as it happened, accountability necessarily became renamed as well. The key then is how to encourage that renaming—that reinvention—of the challenge of education.

CC: Again, the challenge begins with seeing it as a problem of democracy, not a problem of administration of schooling. The public in Mathews’ 1996 book referred not simply to people living in a particular place, but rather to a diverse body of people willing and able to recognize and act on shared concerns. In so doing, they become a responsible public, in which people hold one another accountable to a covenant that has been legitimately decided upon. Our focus on democracy suggests that citizens need to engage one another in the fundamental challenge of choosing “how do we want to educate our youth?” This is where we remain, and we are still looking for innovators and experimenters.

The Current Focus

RN: The foundation’s studies remain focused on the implications of a simple premise. Young people are educated through experiences that occur inside and outside of schools. The educational capacity of a community is defined by the ability to put the mélange of educational resources to work in complementary ways. We explore the governance of educational resources as a fundamental challenge of democratic citizenship.

PL: The problem is that education remains widely seen as the singular responsibility of schools and professionals. Critical roles citizens play and need to play go unrecognized by professionals and non-professionals. As education has become schooling, the non-school educational assets in communities have largely disappeared from the naming and framing of public choices about issues that affect the education of youth. Thus professional educators have detached the governance of schools from the governance of the myriad non-school activities that critically affect educational outcomes. Non-school activities remain as an educational force, but they are not often the subject of citizen-to-citizen judgment and innovation.

Public Education as Community Work

The research is now organized into two complementary areas, both studying innovations in practice. One focuses on showing the potential for the education that occurs outside of schools. The other explores ways that people can bring the governance of public schooling into the larger context of the governance of all educational resources.

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The Kettering Research Lab begins new research on improving water quality.