

CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2017

Countering Democracy's Challenges

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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**

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make 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.

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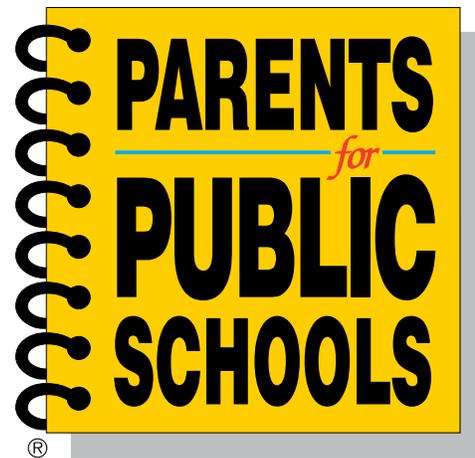
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Parents for Public Schools: Encouraging Educational Citizenship

By Joann Mickens

Parents for Public Schools (PPS), a national nonprofit based in Jackson, Mississippi, began working with the Kettering Foundation in 2013, first on a yearlong project that included experiments concerning how local PPS chapters could develop an issue guide that would reframe school issues as community-based issues. A second project, begun in 2015, built on the first one, and examined the use of that issue guide in the communities where PPS has local chapters. The third project, begun in 2017, is a culmination of the first two and explores how the organization can become a learning center that brings select chapters together to encourage democratic practices to help the

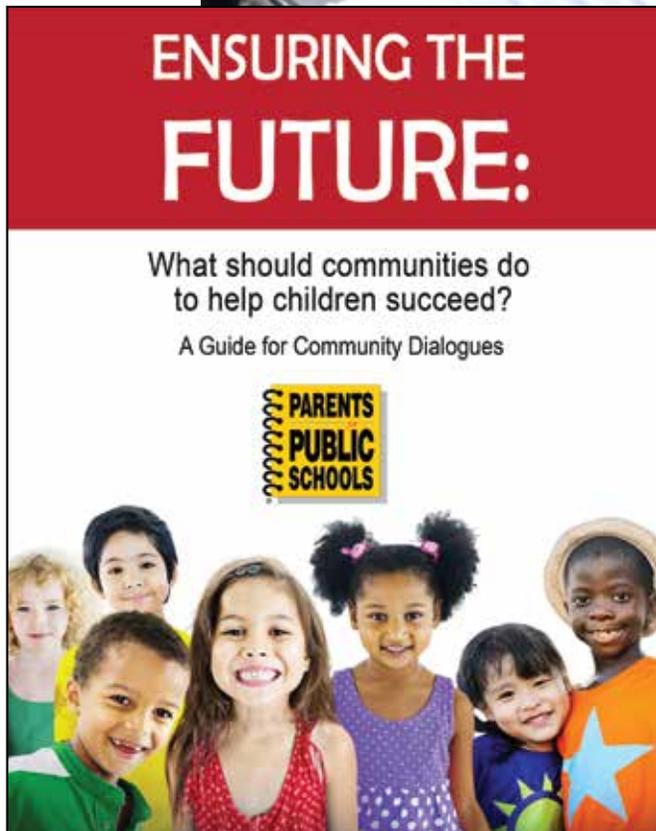


chapters set direction for—and act to take ownership of—accountability for the education of the children in their communities.

From its start with a small group of parents in Jackson and then the opening of its national office in 1991, PPS has focused on how public education supports and contributes to a successful, working democracy. PPS today keeps this focus, but every generation of parents and members must internalize this aspect of the organization to their own work. This sometimes becomes challenging when our members and chapters are so concerned with the immediate needs and issues of public schools as their children are being impacted—issues such as standardized testing, Common Core state standards, teacher evaluation, vouchers, and charter schools. Sometimes they



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democracy that works for citizens and to finding solutions for the problems that exist. This project helped PPS refocus its energies and conversations to familiarize new generations of PPS parents with these concepts. The team that originally worked with Kettering included some of our very newest members, and this was a great benefit for them.

The issue guide that was created gave PPS a concrete tool to encourage the active discussion and participation of citizens in the education of the youth in their communities. Because so many of our chapters hold forums and conversations with the public and with school district and community leaders, the deliberative approach to such discussions was an invaluable addition to our repertoire.

can become lost in these issues and can forget how the ability to resolve issues affects the larger picture, i.e., our society and whether it will be the educated society needed for a strong and vibrant democracy.

The opportunity to collaborate with the Kettering Foundation has given PPS the privilege of seeing Kettering's own commitment to a

To sum up the first project, participating not only contributed to the personal growth of our PPS team

members, but also reinvigorated PPS as an organization and planted the seeds for continued growth and progress in the future.

Beginning in May 2015, and continuing through March 2016, PPS hosted a series of community forums to gain the public's view of who bears responsibility for preparing children for future success. The goal was to move the discussion from what schools or families should do to the idea that the education of our children is a community endeavor that requires the resources, support, and commitment of all. It begged the question, what does the future hold for the community if the emerging generations are not prepared to lead successful lives? This question of success went far beyond academic performance and got to the very continuance of our way of life.

Using the issue guide developed in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, *Ensuring the Future: What Should Communities Do to Help Children Succeed?*, PPS gathered 24 different groups of citizens in 11 different locations across the country with the objective of engaging them in conversations to get their perspectives on this issue. These conversations were held in the Northwest, the Northeast, the Midwest, and the South. Participants were residents of communities as small in size as

Philadelphia, Mississippi (population of less than 8,000), to large cities like Seattle, Washington (population of 608,000).

In addition, the conversations included a diversity of racial and ethnic groups. In every instance, forum attendees were representative of the diversity within the general population in those communities. In total, 43 percent of the participants were African American, 38 percent were Caucasian, 4 percent were Asian, and 13 percent were Hispanic.



The experience using the issue guide was one of building relationships, uncovering community concerns, and recognizing that even though it was a big job, community members were willing to explore and take responsibility for preparing children for future success.

KETTERING FOUNDATION RESEARCH,

including the current exchange with Parents for Public Schools, has identified characteristics of citizenship in community politics that can foster a sense of shared control over the future. We are studying the development of democratic forms of the practices through which people make collective choices—about the education of youth and about opportunities for new kinds of productive interactions.

Perhaps the most interesting finding from our past work with PPS, which started in 1999, is that an organization like Parents for Public Schools, and all that its name implies, has recognized that framing educational issues as a community challenge is not antithetical to their mission of supporting public schools, but rather a necessary condition to it. The reason is rooted in the belief that healthy schools depend on healthy communities, with the latter being a function of the shared sense that communities of people have the responsibility and power to shape their future.

The current research project with PPS, regarding what it means to operate as a learning center, offers the Kettering Foundation an opportunity to engage questions connected throughout its entire program chart. This includes a focus on:

- **Citizens:** What encourages citizen-to-citizen interactions, including questions around the naming and framing of issues?

The forums tended to include more females (65 percent) than males (35 percent), and most of the participants (52 percent) were between the ages of 30 and 49; however, the next largest group was comprised of those from 50 to 74 years old, many of whom no longer had children of school age. In fact, almost half of those participating (47 percent) did not have children in public school, an indication that there was interest in this topic throughout the community. It was also gratifying to note that only 35 percent of those participating were PPS members, so we were reaching community members who did not necessarily hold the same perspective of public schools as PPS did. Nevertheless, in all instances, moderators found forum participants to be interested and engaged in the process.

The experience using the issue guide was one of building relationships, uncovering community concerns, and recognizing that even though it was a big job, community members were willing to explore and take responsibility for preparing children for future success. It also helped identify areas of need that could benefit from the work of PPS. In particular, there was the recognition by community members that parents, in order to be effective advocates for their children, need to

be provided with the education and tools to do so. Of course, providing information and providing tools for parents is a huge focus of PPS work.

The forums also reiterated that we cannot forget the importance of connecting with underrepresented parents. Their voices must also be heard. PPS's sponsorship of these forums is perfectly in line with its mission of educating parents/community members and advocating for public schools and ALL children. The forums reminded us of the power of dialogue and deliberation and how it might lead to action and consequently, change. One moderator said, "I realized if you first of all bring people together intentionally, have prepared material prior to the meeting, and have an effective process to hear all voices, you can leave with next steps to produce outcomes."

Since PPS first began working with Kettering, the organization's mission statement has been revised to reflect the changes the organization has gone through. The previous mission statement, "PPS promotes and strengthens public schools by engaging, educating and mobilizing parents" was changed in March 2016 to "Parents for Public Schools advances the role of families and communities in securing a high quality public education for every child." The

- **Community:** How can a communitywide coalition encourage and support local efforts in learning about innovations in democratic practices from one another?
- **Institutions:** How do institutional actors in these places align their routines with the practices of democratic citizenship in a way that encourages the kind of community and citizen-to-citizen interaction noted in this article?
- **Chapter-Based Organizations:** How can a national, chapter-based institution bring these ideas into its work, through learning exchanges with its own chapters, which will be completely different from the way it normally works? How can a learning center facilitate such an endeavor in a learning mode? How can insights about that way of working be shared with other centers that aspire to be similarly constructive of regional democratic capacity?

While all of the foundation's research touches on the first three questions, the last one is specific to this project, and may be where we have the most opportunity to learn. It could lead to critical, practical insights that we can share with other chapter-based organizations, with which we may work in the future.

For more information on this research, please contact Kettering Foundation program officer Phillip D. Lurie at plurie@kettering.org.

new mission statement is more inclusive and was arrived at using feedback and input from PPS chapters in order to reflect the work that they see themselves doing in their communities.

Currently, PPS is exploring what it means for the national chapter to become a “learning center” that brings select chapters together to encourage democratic practices designed to help the chapters in their communities set direction for, and act to take owner-

ship of, accountability for the education of children.

For PPS, a “learning center” is a self-conscious hub of learning exchange about practical insights regarding democratic citizenship (or governance). A “center” acts as a resource for people who want to explore ways to develop the democratic work of citizenship in their communities. That is, how can citizens work together around shared problems related to education, particularly when tensions arise about what should be done? The center will work to develop the capacity of others to do such work in their communities. Centers are generally coalitions (networks), but rather than be organizers of action, they are organizers of exchanges focused on learning.

What the implications of this mode of operating will be for PPS and its local chapters remains an ongoing area of exploration for the organization. Though changing the organizational focus remains a scary proposition, PPS highly anticipates what we will learn about our national staff, our local chapters, and the communities in which they operate as we set out on this next phase of our work with the foundation. ■

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