

# CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2018

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## Listening to Place-Based Philanthropies at the Edge

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## People-Centered and People-Driven: A New Kind of Organization for Zimbabwe

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## Experiments in **ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION**



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](http://www.kettering.org).

*Connections* is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459. The articles in *Connections* reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.

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ISSN 2470-8003

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# Kindred: Influencing the Education of the Next Generation

By Laura Wilson Phelan



**K**indred is a diverse and loving community of parents committed to ending educational inequity. The organization, founded in 2016, shifts the way parents work with one another and with educators to create equitable access to the resources all children need to thrive. Research demonstrates that family engagement in education plays a key role in influencing a child's life outcomes. Our theory of change hypothesizes that changes in parent beliefs, values, and networks will lead parents to take collaborative action that improves outcomes for all students.

Kindred works by building relationships among parents from diverse racial and economic backgrounds to address the longstanding educational inequity in their schools. Research on factors influencing a child's well-being into adulthood substantiates three primary reasons for doing this:

1. Parents exude tremendous influence over the well-being and success of their children;
2. The reciprocal interactions between school staff and families influence how and whether families receive and follow the advice of teachers; and
3. How families engage one another in school affects a family's sense of belonging in the school, which



**Much of Kindred’s work focuses on helping parents see themselves as democratic actors, using shared issues associated with their young children as an entry point.**

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in turn influences how and from where the family receives information to support their child’s academic and socioemotional development.

Furthermore, a child’s early sense of socialization—the set of norms associated with expected behaviors—comes in large part from school. Beliefs associated with various aspects of individual and collective identity, including race, economic class, and expectations about what it means to live in and contribute to a democratic society, are often formed and perpetuated by one’s experience in school. Much of Kindred’s work focuses on helping parents see themselves as democratic actors, using shared issues associated with their young children as an entry point.

Kindred has entered into a learning exchange with the Kettering Foundation to explore our mutual interest in the fundamental idea that for democracy to work as it should, people must be able to shape their collective future. One of the most important ways of doing that is through the education of the next generation. At Kindred, we are exploring ways to mobilize parents of diverse racial and economic backgrounds to work collaboratively to ensure all children in their school community have equitable access to learning opportunity.

More specifically, we’ve identified the following opportunities for exploration:

- how cultivating parents’ connection with one another might transform their individual and collective identity to contribute meaningfully (through their time and resources) not only to the learning outcomes of their own child(ren), but also all children in the school community;
- determining whether and how Kindred’s desire to have parents generate these connections and collective commitment endures and morphs into their own versions of democratic actions; and
- how Kindred, working as a center for learning (that is, creating a hub where parents and other actors can share insights and ideas that

inspire each other to continue to take action), can aid in helping parents sustain their commitment to such actions.

## CULTIVATING PARENTS' CONNECTION

### *Tackling Deeply Rooted Challenges*

Kindred has identified several challenges to motivating collective action around school-based issues. First, parents from different economic, racial, and cultural backgrounds bring those associated, diverse experiences to their interactions with the educational system. Take, for example, the grading system, which privileges individual student academic performance above almost all else, and how that may contrast with a collectivist culture, which prioritizes the advancement of all. Public education as manifested in schools is often positioned as a zero-sum game. Those with the knowledge about how to best access school-based resources and the time to do so glean more than those without this knowledge and time. Correlatively, parent efforts in diverse schools, which are often led by dominant culture families, are not usually directed at equitable access to opportunity for all children.

Second, socialized norms deter openly discussing economic, racial, and cultural differences and their

influence on schooling. This further exacerbates advantage differences among children from low- and middle-to-high-income households and dominant and nondominant races and cultures. In the United States, those who are poor receive constant messaging that their situation should be a source of shame. Likewise, the fear of being called racist and the sometimes unintentional, but common demonstration of bias and prejudice toward people of color makes talking about race uncomfortable, so adults will often shy away from these conversations unless the setting is structured and predictable.

To combat these challenges, Kindred works to provide space and





structure for difficult conversations that will unpack socialized norms and restructure them so that talking about economic, racial, and cultural differences becomes an opportunity to reimagine what schooling could look like if it were more inclusive and grounded in the diverse experiences of families.

#### *Kindred's Dialogue-to-Action Model*

Kindred's first year working in a school is focused on building trust and authentic relationships among diverse parents. To do this, Kindred facilitates small-group dialogues of 15 to 20 parents over a 10-week period. These dialogues help parents recognize the role their backgrounds and perceptions might play in welcoming or alienating families and in limiting opportunities for children of color at their school. In these ses-

sions, parents share personal stories with one another on topics such as family identities, histories, common aspirations for their children, and the role that bias plays in perpetuating inequity. Kindred then introduces data that shows that the stories shared are actually demonstrative of trends in broader society and have implications for equitable opportunities for the children of the parents in their dialogue groups. This often brings feelings of indignation; Kindred then helps parents find a pathway to take action that benefits the entire school community.

The effect of the dialogues is multilayered. In some cases, parents feel compelled to personally reach out to other parents in their groups to connect and help with a resource transfer—such as information about

summer camp or a job or cultural norms. Kindred facilitates this by having parents connect one on one in between meetings, but we otherwise let the natural tendency to want to help one another flow without interference. At a group level, Kindred facilitates a discussion on the root causes of inequitable opportunities for children, and parents select one strand of that root cause on which to take action. Parents then take that action together. The effect is that several actions, led by parents, happen in schools where Kindred has created the conditions mentioned above.

For example, one group of parents is working to inform and improve the way that room parents (parents who assist the teacher with communication to other parents and organize class resource-gathering like teacher gifts) collect and share information with all parents in the class to make the information accessible and more useful to parents so they can better support their child's academic progress.

In some groups, parents disagreed about which action to take, not because one idea was wrong, but because individuals were excited about their own ideas. In these cases, the facilitator centers the group back on the initial root cause analysis and asks the group to select an action that addresses that root cause most

directly and can be completed by the group members, who are often quite busy. If one idea still doesn't rise to the top, the group votes on which action to take and decides how the other idea(s) might be addressed later. At one school, a subcommittee from the PTO was developed that would follow up on the ideas that hadn't yet been acted upon and provide parent support for their completion. Once an idea is selected, the facilitator builds enthusiasm for the action and assigns responsibilities for its completion.

In some schools, the actions complement each other. In one instance, a school had two groups, and both wanted to survey parents to gather information. The groups combined efforts and created one survey. At another school, both groups wanted to create a PTO, so they combined into one group to carry that action forward. The complementarity was realized because both groups share



**Kindred believes that democratic citizenship requires that representative voices are truly heard.**

at least one facilitator. The common facilitator identifies areas of complementarity and asks group members what they want to do with it. The groups may decide to pursue their actions independently or join forces.

### **BUILDING PARENT INITIATIVE**

As a stepping stone to sustaining parent collective action beyond Kindred's direct role, the second year of Kindred's school support is focused on training and coaching parent dialogue participants to lead their own groups. At this stage, parents in teams of two facilitate new parent dialogue groups. The new facilitators follow Kindred's curriculum, which helps them guide parents through the relationship-building that leads to collective action. We support parent facilitators as they continue their own personal work in identity development through coaching, as well as ongoing group support through regular meetings. The purpose of this stage is to build a team of parent leaders who are equity-minded and connected with one another to sustain and lead the work Kindred helped begin.

### **KINDRED AS A CENTER FOR LEARNING**

Kindred believes that democratic citizenship requires that representative voices are truly heard. At present,

across our country, the channels for these voices are often dominated by people from middle- and upper-income households. Kindred's work is a study of what happens when conditions are created for truly representative voices to contribute to problem-solving—within the structures of dialogues and beyond.

Kindred is building its capacity to act as a hub of learning for insights on democratic practice and a resource for others who want to experiment with such practices. We currently define the approach as helping parents create spaces across schools and within schools to interact with one another outside of their school communities and determine actions they may take together and individually to promote equitable education outcomes for students. We encourage parents to create their own “tables” around which people may gather for deliberation and action rather than relying only on the defined table that Kindred has provided. Through the creation of this “hub,” Kindred hopes to engender a political awakening around shared problems related to education that will mobilize action on the part of parents and education allies. ■

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