

CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2020

An Experiment Studying Experiments

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COVID-19 Community Response and the Appetite for Civic Engagement

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The Work of
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.

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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In It Together: Opening American Education

By Damien Connors

While the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has brought many devastating consequences and exposed inequities in American education, it has also exposed the necessity for meaningful partnerships between families, communities, and education professionals. Parents and other custodial guardians with students at home are having to substitute as teachers, friends, and coaches. There is a growing recognition that educators are, even under normal circumstances, engaged in work that often reaches far beyond the school day. But beyond the role that educators can and must play, families and others in the community have important roles in educating youth as well. Communities and educators alike are beginning to acknowledge the need for complementary, coproductive partnerships.

Kettering researches ways that the community can be seen as an environment for the education of youth. The increased awareness and immediate needs brought on by the current crisis provide an opportunity to reimagine how this might be so.

Indeed, the education of youth is conventionally thought of as the responsibility of professionals, while, in fact, it is the responsibility of the entire community. This looks different from one community to the next and isn't limited to traditional classroom lessons. It is shared work. The

limitations and demands of the pandemic continue to make more and more apparent the need for a shared approach to addressing the diverse educational needs of youth and their families.

From systemic inequities revealed through resource deficiencies to general communication challenges and social-emotional student health, citizens are daily faced with the startling reality that institutional education is, in many ways, closed to the public. Why, one may ask? If we look at institutional system design, professionalized silos, systemic racism, and the litany of additional boundary-shaping attitudes and behaviors between educational institutions and communities, one sees a hand-me-down mode of operating that carries with it deep limitations. This system might be considered an emblem of a past in which homogenous groups of professionals and decision-makers shaped institutions. The unfortunate consequences of this reality are evident everywhere, especially as more parents must try to engage directly with public education systems. These consequences are especially vivid in minority communities—particularly Black and Brown neighborhoods. This institutional structure and the systems that buttress it have failed generations of Americans and continue to diminish the public’s role in the education of youth.



While the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has brought many devastating consequences and exposed inequities in American education, it has also exposed the necessity for meaningful partnerships between families, communities, and education professionals.

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey wrote that the “imagination is as much a normal and integral part of human activity as is muscular movement.” Civic atrophy and institutional barricades may have eroded our imaginative impulses. But the global pandemic, for all its negatives, provides an opportunity to reimagine what an open, equitable education system might be. This requires an openness of mind that demands of professionals and people in communities that each move beyond limited understandings of “engagement” activities to a more robust system of complementary acting and

coproduction. In this view, communities would be fully integrated into the life and structure of schools—and vice versa.

The specific role these groups would play looks different from one local community to the next. To understand the role of the community in education is to also understand that education is more than a student's performance in school. Learning happens in school hallways, community gyms, homes, sporting fields, school buses, street corners, bodegas, school board meetings, and town halls. Seeing the community as an environment for education means the deployment of the fullest set of resources to support the education of young people. An open system looks across the entire community to determine how to meet the moment.



Seeing the community as an environment for education means the deployment of the fullest set of resources to support the education of young people.

In Is There a Public for Public Schools? David Mathews argues that “schools can’t simply be institutions in our communities the way a distribution center for a chain of retail stores is in a community. Schools are meant to be an integral part of a community, so strengthening the public is actually strengthening the [public’s] schools.” The educational inequity experienced in communities due to systemic limitations is an immediate reason the reimaging of how our educational system works is so necessary. The particularities of communities require approaches of complementary acting that give attention to the unique assets and resources available (or missing) in addressing the task of education as communities and educational institutions share responsibility.

From 2014 to 2017, I served as executive director of an education equity organization in Bridgeport, Connecticut. I worked closely with a group of grandparents caring for grandchildren who were no longer in the full custody of their parents. This group called themselves “Grandparents, Here We Go Again.” This name, according to the group’s leaders, captured their frustration with “the system” and the emotional toll of shouldering the responsibility of care for children that, in their words, they “did not choose.” The



compounded challenges of navigating the education system and providing for their grandchildren were “two full-time jobs,” in the words of one grandparent.

These grandparents’ material conditions and general lack of access to basic resources, particularly those that best positioned them to care for their grandchildren, gave them little choice but to find community among others who were in similar situations. They sought, created, and cultivated community with one another. Their success and survival depended on the sharing of all kinds of resources, including food pantry information, knowledge regarding state grants, and free childcare services. There were approximately 25 in this group, some with custody of up to 5 children. Their shared challenge was getting the schools and the systems, institutions, and folks in leadership

that surrounded them to understand their limitations but to also recognize that they themselves had resources to offer. These grandmothers and grandfathers were industrious and driven by imagination—the potential of what could be. They created resource guides and shared them with parents and other custodial guardians who had children in the schools their children attended.

They persisted. The grandparents group organized a public conversation with elected officials and education leaders. They partnered with teachers and families and shared their needs, desires for policy changes, and a plan for better relationships with schools. The conversation was a transformative moment for them. They recognized and felt a sense of agency they hadn’t before. This was a moment in which boundaries were broken; the grandparent,

community members in attendance, school leaders, and elected officials opened up to the possibility of another way of being in relationship. They were honest and heard each other in a new way, as partners in a shared effort to educate and prepare for the promise of a fulfilling future.

No one community has the prescription for how another reimagines the work of educating youth. But the public work and goods of one effort can be instructive for others. Resuscitating our civic culture to the benefit of education demands that we recognize the complementary relationship of people in community and institutions of education. It is a work of collective imagining that will require humility and a willingness to unite both expert and community knowledge to produce the best possi-

ble educational outcomes for young people.

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. noted in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” While we work and imagine locally, we must simultaneously keep our eyes fixed on a high vision in which all young people have access to education that enables them, in King’s words in an article written while he was a student at Morehouse College, to “become more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the legitimate goals of [their lives].”

Kettering is interested in learning with others who are trying to reimagine ways to foster more complementary production when it comes to education—ways of seeing it as a shared concern and shared responsibility among various people and organizations in community as well as formal institutions, both local and national. We are trying to learn what actions such innovators undertake, what forms the organizations pursuing them adopt, what they learn, and how they make sense of it. We invite those who are engaged in this work of educating youth to contact us. ■



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