The Changing Culture of Learning
The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research organization supported by an endowment. 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 45459-2799. 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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In his most recent book, Kettering Foundation president David Mathews considers what citizens and educators alike want from public education and how they might come closer to getting it. Mathews examines the obstacles that block them, beginning with significant differences in the ways that citizens see problems of education and how professional educators and policymakers talk about them. Discussions of accountability, the achievement gap, vouchers, and the like don’t always resonate with people’s real concerns. Mathews argues that this has resulted in a deep chasm between citizens and the schools that serve them.

Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy updates Kettering’s research findings, restates and expands on ideas raised in Mathews’ earlier book, Is There a Public for Public Schools? (Kettering Foundation Press, 1996), and adds material that illustrates how to build a public for public education.

Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy

By David Mathews

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By David Mathews

As in past issues of Connections, we report on one area of research that we’ve reviewed in depth. This year, we have been reviewing our studies of the public and public education. This introduction will provide an overview of how this research has evolved over the years. Trying to understand the role of education in a democracy has been quite a journey.

The companion publication to Connections, the Kettering Review, goes into considerable detail about the ideas and insights that have marked our journey. This piece can’t do what the Review does in drawing together different lines of thought into a powerful narrative. (Obviously, I hope that you will read the Review.) The conceptual terrain we traveled has been marked by scholars like John Dewey; Lawrence Cremin, one of our past trustees and a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian; and Edmund Gordon, professor emeritus at Columbia’s Teachers College. Dewey is famous (or infamous depending on your point of view) for shifting the spotlight from schools to education and the community. Cremin, who was my major professor at Columbia, delved into American history to document the number and variety of institutions used to educate new generations—from the family and home to religious institutions and television programs. (Cremin would surely have included the Internet if he had lived to see the role it now plays in our lives.) Gordon is known for an impressive body of research over a long career, and we were particularly struck by his observation that communities themselves are educating institutions.

We don’t do our research by reading books in libraries, however. We learn from the experiences that people tell us about when they try to strengthen democracy—that is, try to do things that will give citizens greater control over their future. For instance, we have benefited recently from what we learned from citizens who aren’t teachers but who use community resources to close the achievement gap, which turns out to be many gaps.

Our research began with, and still includes, a focus on the public schools. Yet, gradually, we broadened our scope to look at all forms of education, rather than one particular institution—the school. Like Cremin and Gordon, we became aware of the many institutions that educate, including communities themselves.

As our research evolved from looking at schools to seeing schools as part of a larger system of education, we found it necessary to make a distinction, which is useful if not overdrawn. The act of transmitting information from one generation to another has been called instructing or teaching. Learning, on the other hand, is the ability to give meaning to what is happening in our world so we can decide how we should act. (Ideally, of course, teaching strengthens the ability to learn.)

Then we asked, where does learning take place? The answer we came up with is the same as when we asked about education. Learning begins in communities. And as Gordon points out, every community influences the learning that occurs through a culture or set of expectations that either promotes learning and education or devalues it. So our lens for...
research opened wider still. We were looking at schooling, education writ large, and, within education, learning. And we were looking at all three in communities with a particular focus on the culture of learning. As reported in the Review, it was only a short—but big—step to move from seeing the educational resources in a community to seeing the community itself as an educator; that is, as a political actor capable of bringing together all of its educating institutions, which would significantly strengthen the hand of citizens.

We always ask ourselves about the practical application of what we are finding in the research. So if communities have the power to educate, and they exercise that power through a culture that promotes learning, what would such a culture look like in everyday life? The answer was clear, and we had seen it in practice: everybody in the community would be expected to do something that would enrich what young people were learning. As was said in one city, everybody is trying to educate our kids. We knew of several communities that were doing just that—getting everyone involved in education. St. Louis Park, Minnesota, and Albion, Michigan, come to mind. We also had cases of communities where people without much formal education themselves had made useful contributions. And we had seen numerous examples of using community resources to educate, including horse farms, fish tanks, and newspapers. (For more on using local resources, see Jack Shelton’s *Consequential Learning.*) But would these projects change the culture?

At this point, we hit a major obstacle, a rock in the road you might say. Our research is about democratic practices, things citizens can do. And changing a culture is a tall order. Cultures form over long periods of time, and they are almost impossible to change, certainly not through quick fixes. Changing a culture requires persistence. One or two community projects won’t do the job. As we struggled with this issue, we recalled that keeping up the political momentum to complete work citizens are doing is more likely to occur if people are learning along the way. When that is happening, citizens profit from things that go wrong. They learn from their mistakes and press ahead. Communities intent on projects succeeding, on the other hand, often have trouble keeping up their momentum. If their projects succeed, they are satisfied and quit working, which isn’t a good idea when dealing with persistent problems. And if their projects fail, they get discouraged and also quit. So whether they succeed or fail doesn’t make much difference. Learning communities are different. If a project succeeds, they want to improve on what they have accomplished. They move on to a new project. If they fail, they learn from mistakes. They fail successfully.

Although cultures of learning are slow to evolve, communities can become better at learning. That is, the way they go about learning can change. One way to do that is to change how they assess civic projects. Conventional evaluations can inhibit learning, particularly if communities rely on outside experts to tell them what worked and what didn’t. Certainly, perspectives from outside a community can be helpful, but citizens have to assess their progress themselves in order to learn. It’s fine to see what others are doing, but for learning communities, imitation is limitation. The search of looking for best practices can also inhibit learning and promote imitation.

Ironically, accountability efforts, like evaluations, can be another impediment to community learning. Accountability is usually judged by setting fixed goals and measuring progress against it. Yet communities learn more when they assess both goals and the progress they have made. Sometimes the most important lesson learned is that the goals were incomplete or just wrong. To make matters worse, the institution being held accountable may not be the only one that is responsible. In education, schools are usually the ones held accountable, and they should be. But they aren’t the only ones responsible. If communities can educate, they are also accountable. And citizens are aware that, ultimately, they are accountable for what happens to young people. A report on the accountability movement being done with Dan Yankelovich and Jean Johnson of Public Agenda will be available before year’s end. Preliminary results show a considerable gap between what institutions consider being accountable and what citizens want from accountability standards, which they have little voice in setting.

The bottom line: unless a community is learning itself as it tries to enrich the learning of young people, the community is unlikely to keep up the initiative it takes to change its culture.

Where do we go next in our journey?

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*It was only a short—but big—step to move from seeing the educational resources in a community to seeing the community itself as an educator; that is, as a political actor capable of bringing together all of its educating institutions, which would significantly strengthen the hand of citizens.*

The proposition that a community learns is admittedly problematic and demands more attention. People learn. Maybe companies and teams learn. But communities? And if they learn, how? Does everyone learn the same thing together? Not likely. And how much learning has to occur before a culture changes? Or to be more practical, what creates the expectation that everyone will try to teach the kids? Can everyone teach, even those with little formal education? And, how will schools react to everyone teaching? Will they feel reinforced or usurped? Please join us in responding to these questions or in posing others.

David Mathews is president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at matthews@kettering.org.
"If you think about the history of school and the history of education in the United States, when we first organized public schools, they were pretty much limited to reading, writing, and counting," explains Edmund Gordon.1

“We’ve added a lot of other things, but I think it was Ben Franklin who has a little essay on education and he talks about school as where one goes to learn these instrumentalities, but it is to life that we turn to learn about living and just about everything else.”

At age 90, Gordon is director of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, in addition to several other positions. His career in education spans over half a century and he has contributed to nearly all of the most important initiatives in education in that period: desegregation of schools, Head Start, and complementary/supplementary education. His work has expanded upon and deepened ideas and themes first written about by John Dewey and Lawrence Cremin, two other educational thinkers whose writings on the subject have greatly influenced Kettering Foundation research. He shared his insights in an interview with Kettering program officer Amy Lee, excerpted below.

“I stand with Dewey and Cremin and a few others of us who are arguing that we have misunderstood education when we have equated it with schooling. I contend that schooling is not coterminous with education, that is, schooling is a piece of education, education is far broader. When I first started talking about supplementary education, a woman challenged my use of the term; she said, ‘You’re talking about a supplement to schooling, but maybe you ought to be talking about schooling as supplementary to life, because there’s so much more out there to be learned and people learn so much more in life than the stuff we learn in school.

“In fact, school has moved more and more toward trying to be inclusive of all of the things that people have to learn, and of course, she was arguing that it never could be so inclusive, and I would say is probably not the most effective place to learn most of what it is people need to know in order to live effective lives. That is not to argue that those things that have been rarefied for teaching and learning in school are not important, they’re terribly important, and I think improvement of schools and distribution of high-quality education—I’m all for all of those, and don’t want to detract from them at all. But we
can’t stop there, there’s all this other stuff that has to happen if we really want to educate our children.”

Gordon said he thinks it’s correct to depend upon schools to teach the basic skills of complex communication, reasoning with numbers, using words to communicate, and using words and the symbolic relationships between things to solve problems. “But there are other ways to solve problems. Most of us don’t have much opportunity to visit farms now, but if you go out to the farm, at least before they became so modernized, people were solving all kinds of practical problems of farming, of manufacture, with relatively little mastery of the academic stuff. They were still learning how to reason, learning how to apply logic to things, even learning something about numeric relationships, without such formal instruction.

“Some years ago I was meeting with a group of middle-class parents in a suburb of New York City, and they felt that having moved to the suburbs, having sought to place their kids in good schools, and insisting that they go, was the end of their responsibility, that they paid taxes that were high enough for the school to take on that responsibility. But if you look carefully at what most affluent and educationally sophisticated parents do, these are families that invest heavily in out-of-school learning, whether it’s taking trips or going to the museum or going to the library, talking with kids at home, giving kids responsibilities, all kinds of non-deliberately educational experiences which are opportunities to learn for these kids. And we know from the research of people like Jane Mercer and Dick Wolf that these informal supports for academic learning make a difference in the achievement of kids.

“The ways in which out-of-school experiences support the mastery of academic subject matter, and I think possibly more important, the ways in which they support the development of a sense of agency, a sense that ‘I can do something about this’ in children, are tremendously important.”

In the course of trying to discover more settings where children could learn, some of Gordon’s colleagues and students fanned out through the community of Harlem, interviewing community members to find out where they went to learn different things. “And there were places people went to learn language other than school, there were places where people went to learn to shoot craps, not in school. There were places that they went to to learn about belief in God, not in school, not in church. One chap was talking about how he really came to understand society when he became involved in politics. Education has to do with discovery—that learning of the culture, the meanings assigned, the rarefied techniques that have come out of the life experiences of people. They seem to be just as important for human adaptation as these things that we have singled out in school to teach.”

In this vein Gordon’s and Kettering’s interests overlap. In the 2008 edition of Connections, Connie Crockett reported some early research on a similar theme: “educators within communities.”

Georgetown, Kentucky, has retired racehorses needing attention and care that have inspired responsibility from formerly withdrawn kids. Another local resource for educating is the bluegrass music found everywhere. Having learned to fiddle by being surrounded by fiddlers, 18-year-old Chloe Roberts organized a bluegrass camp for kids in a distant corner of the state. She says “The elders teach us that there is life beyond school, that there is a community to belong to….” In north Lexington, [the health department] got young people hacking away at the 10-foot weeds around an old cemetery. They found the gravesites of native African poets and Kentucky Derby winners, researched those names, and got the (now pristine) site on the National Register of Historic Places. [St. Louis Park] adopted a community covenant to put children first… The “Children First” premise changed how [a longtime school cook] reacted when she noticed a harried young girl who had missed lunch. “Slow down, honey, I’ll fix you something to eat,” she told the youngster. Her kind attitude prompted tears and a hug from the child, who confided that she had never before been called “honey.” The cook’s caring attitude may have made a significant difference in that child’s academic life?

In these communities, Kettering Foundation observed both individual citizens and citizens working together, taking the resources they have and teaching children what the community believes they need to know. Some of what these educators taught directly supported academic instruction (basic math concepts slipped into the care and feeding of horses; a supplemental history lesson conveyed in cleaning up the cemetery) but some of it is that other kind of learning that Gordon mentioned, which often isn’t done in school: the learning that one can have some influence over one’s future, the acquisition of a sense of agency. Somehow, all these citizens came to see education as something they could be
Community as an Educational Institution

sometimes asked, what are communities to do, how can communities do something? The New York Urban League and the National Urban League and I have been talking for the last six months about a model that we have developed here in Rockland County [New York]. It’s called a Comprehensive Education Resource Center. It’s really modeled after the old Settlement houses that developed at the turn of the 20th century, when we had millions of immigrants coming into this country who needed to be socialized, or acculturated, to life in the United States. The notion of a comprehensive resource center is a facility that should be available in communities to families that do not yet appreciate or understand the kind of things that need to happen outside of school in order to make schooling work, or, I like to address it more broadly, the kinds of things that need to happen in the lives of children if intellective competence is the end. And these resource centers have the responsibility for what I call the social marketing of the idea that education does not end at the school bell, the idea that parents and other interested adults not only can but should play an active role. They will make available resources to those parents that they can use, they will teach parents how to do it. I like to make reference to a very successful black neurosurgeon whose grandmother used to supervise his homework. Ben Carson reports in his biography that he was going into middle school when he realized that this grandmother who had supervised his homework and his reading was herself illiterate. But she knew that she needed to hold him responsible for what he was doing and he needed to be accountable so she would sit him down and he would explain what his schoolwork was about; he would not only read to her, but he would explain what he had read. Not herself an educated person, but knowing that involvement in the supervision of the education of this youngster was important. So that we don’t necessarily have to be highly educated ourselves to support the educational and personal development of other people.”

What has been done in Mobile, Alabama, and Kentucky and other places has been just that: regular people, regardless of their personal education level, coming to recognize that they can help children learn. These have been grassroots, almost purely experimental, efforts. So it is interesting to see what has been developing organically in communities that Kettering is studying being advocated by one of the most learned and prestigious minds in education.

“The model that we’re using here in Rockland County is attached to the local community college,” said Gordon. “The model that we’re trying to develop in Manhattan, Harlem, and Brooklyn will be attached to public schools, using the school facility, but independent of the school, because one of the things we’re trying to help parents understand is that they have the right and the responsibility to hold the school accountable for what it does. One of the reasons we’ve gone to the local community college here, and to the Urban League in New York, is these are institutions that already exist. It will certainly help if we can get federal grants or state grants to support it, but my impression is most communities already have some of these resources, and what we need to do is begin to coordinate them, bring them to people’s attention, but most important is to generate a community commitment to the function.”

Amy Lee is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at alee@kettering.org.


actors in. Sometimes they were prompted by a group, a community leader, or a crisis. Sometimes the realization has even been a result of participating in a widespread community conversation, like the kind the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF) held repeatedly in its decades-long work to improve education in Mobile, Alabama. Because of that widespread community engagement, MAEF has in fact been able to have an impact directly within schools, but a big part of Mobile’s improvement also happened outside its schoolrooms. MAEF worked with “whoever needed to be in the room to get what we needed done,” as its founder Carolyn Akers put it. Basically, MAEF identified and engaged crucial actors and resources in the community: churches who gave low-income kids backpacks with school supplies and clothes; Big Brothers and Sisters, who joined in a mentoring program, and students themselves, who take an active, voting role in the planning of all MAEF activities.

Over the course of several decades, MAEF was able to effectively turn the community of Mobile into an educational institution. Thanks to dogged effort by Akers and the rest of MAEF’s (actually quite small) staff, every citizen, business, and organization in Mobile is actively engaged in the process of improving education, from deciding what that improvement should be to implementing the actions to make it happen. Rather than being simply a community with some individuals trying to support the primary educator, the school system, the community of Mobile itself puts education on all its members’ agenda, constantly searches out resources that could be educational assets and encourages networking of such assets to maximize impact.

And this idea, of the community as an educational institution, brings us full-circle—back to Gordon.

“I’ve been arguing recently that families and communities carry a responsibility equal to or at least parallel to the responsibility of schools. And I’m sometimes asked, what are communities to do, how can communities do something? The New York Urban League and the National Urban League and I have been talking for the last six months about a model that we have developed here in Rockland County [New York]. It’s called a Comprehensive Education Resource Center. It’s really modeled after the old Settlement houses that developed at the turn of the 20th century, when we had millions of immigrants coming into this country who needed to be socialized, or acculturated, to life in the United States. The notion of a comprehensive resource center is a facility that should be available in communities to families that do not yet appreciate or understand the kind of things that need to happen outside of school in order to make schooling work, or, I like to address it more broadly, the kinds of things that need to happen in the lives of children if intellective competence is the end. And these resource centers have the responsibility for what I call the social marketing of the idea that education does not end at the school bell, the idea that parents and other interested adults not only can but should play an active role. They will make available resources to those parents that they can use, they will teach parents how to do it. I like to make reference to a very successful black neurosurgeon whose grandmother used to supervise his homework. Ben Carson reports in his biography that he was going into middle school when he realized that this grandmother who had supervised his homework and his reading was herself illiterate. But she knew that she needed to hold him responsible for what he was doing and he needed to be accountable so she would sit him down and he would explain what his schoolwork was about; he would not only read to her, but he would explain what he had read. Not herself an educated person, but knowing that involvement in the supervision of the education of this youngster was important. So that we don’t necessarily have to be highly educated ourselves to support the educational and personal development of other people.”

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Throughout the Kettering Foundation’s research on experiments to strengthen democracy, a central recurring theme is the importance of civic capacity, the political characteristics that allow communities to come together across their differences to face their challenges. Communities need robust and efficient institutional systems to implement policies, but civic capacity determines the underlying processes they use

Civic Capacity

and the Community Role in Education

By Derek Barker and Alexandra Robinson
to reach decisions and take actions. What might this concept mean for the community task of educating our youth? With our focus on education and learning during the past year, we have realized the need to continue and strengthen our research on the critical role of informal actors—parent groups, youth development organizations, religious institutions—in the critical task of education. Although schools may these reforms only scratch the surface of the complex problems facing our young people and seem to be searching for a different approach.¹

The concept of civic capacity offers the promise of a more holistic way to address the problem of education. Elinor Ostrom’s Nobel Prize-winning work is showing that citizens and community actors can play a key role in the “coproduction” of public goods, while John McKnight argues that communities—even the most economically distressed—have key assets that they can themselves bring to bear on the problems that concern them. Applying these insights to the problem of education reveals a counternarrative to the predominant discourse on public education, placing the focus of analysis on the community. Instead of the contemporary education policy literature, we have returned to an earlier generation of education theorists for insight into the community role in education. Although John Dewey saw schools as the primary location of reform efforts, he raised the possibility that schooling might be part of a larger educational system. Lawrence Cremin built on Dewey’s insight, but argued more forcefully for an expansive renewal of the civic sphere and its educative functions. As Cremin wrote, “The important fact is that family life does educate, religious life does educate, and work does educate; and, what is more, the education of all three realms is as intentional as the education of the school, though in different ways and in different measures.”

“‘The important fact is that family life does educate, religious life does educate, and work does educate; and, what is more, the education of all three realms is as intentional as the education of the school, though in different ways and in different measures.’"

be the most visible sites for the education of youth, the concept of civic capacity suggests that education is a task for the community as a whole.

Civic capacities are distinct from, and complementary to, the technical capacities of political systems. Ideally, a community will be strong in both its civic and technical dimensions. Technical capacities, however, are apolitical in nature. That is, they have little direct effect on the political work of bringing diverse groups together to make difficult choices and act collectively. The most visible attempts to address education emphasize technical solutions, such as formal schooling, standardized testing, and policy reforms like charter schools or vouchers. Implicit in this discourse is a framing of public education that revolves around schools, and with that framing a specific set of educational actors are implicated—namely professional teachers and administrators. Parents and youth then are viewed as consumers rather than producers of education. Education experts, including former advocates of policy fixes, have begun to realize that cation by Reclaiming Our Democracy, for example, moves the debate on education reform beyond schools and government policy to a much broader but more difficult renewal of civic life as a whole.²

From this perspective, myriad community entities offer learning opportunities for young people: the family and its social networks, libraries and museums, summer camps, parks, 4-H clubs, and community gardens. Although the educative aspects of these entities are often taken for granted and labeled as “recreational,” they constitute a unique and ever-changing community that educates each child. The organizations and networks that make up this educative world in turn offer opportunities for professionals and citizens alike to be involved in the community task of education. A civic approach to education is therefore not only more holistic, but also more democratic than a narrow focus on formal education within bureaucratic systems. Why Public Schools? Whose Public Schools? What Early Communities Have to Tell Us, a case study of education in early communities in Alabama, provides historical precedent for, and concrete examples of, a civic capacity approach to education.³

In these historical examples, civic groups have taken up educational challenges that now tend to be seen as the function of schools.

Recent initiatives by the Kettering Foundation and its research partners have attempted to see how a civic capacity approach to education might resonate with citizens’ actual experiences. These experiments confirm that citizens, like Cremin, see the challenge of educational inequality in larger terms than school reform. In one project, captured in the documentary film No Textbook Answer, the foundation worked with community organizations across the country to hold deliberative forums on the issue of the academic achievement gap.⁴ In the forums, dangerous neighborhoods riddled with drugs and crime, a lack of positive adult mentorship, absent or overwhelmed parents, and too few character-building extracurricular activities were all identified as contributing to the widening gap between students’ educational success. This research supports the central tenet of a civic capacity approach to education—
that education implicates a range of complex social and political problems. Cremin’s insight, that the educative entities of communities need to play a central role in reform, suggests that the civic sphere offers opportunities for experiments in education that are just as intentional as experiments in schools. During the past year, several recent and ongoing initiatives have focused on the practical implications of a civic capacity framework for the community role in education. A series of workshops with community educators has been identifying various people involved in the education of a community’s youth outside of the formal or professional realm of education. This work is showing that young people often form their most influential bonds with adults outside of school.

The above table provides some concepts for distinguishing between reform strategies that see education as a community task and education as school-based.

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<th>Education as Community Task</th>
<th>Education as School-Based</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Locus of education</strong></td>
<td>The community: both formal and informal educative spaces, across time and space</td>
<td>The school: institutional, formal, and structured educative spaces, bounded time and space</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Role of citizens</strong></td>
<td>To make collective decisions, coproducer of education</td>
<td>Consumer of education, potentially (un)supportive of the institution (e.g. school)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge production</strong></td>
<td>Knowledge is coproduced in interactions between and among actors</td>
<td>Knowledge is transferred</td>
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<td><strong>Public engagement</strong></td>
<td>Interaction between actors around a matter of public education, the public engages educational institutions</td>
<td>Communication to public by institution around a matter of public education, the institution (e.g. school) engages the public</td>
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<td><strong>Accountability</strong></td>
<td>Relational, shared or collective responsibility for educative outcomes</td>
<td>Providing standardized data to measure outcomes</td>
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<td><strong>Reform strategy</strong></td>
<td>Incrementally strengthen the community as a whole; experiments in informal sector</td>
<td>Policy fixes (charter schools, standardized testing, teacher training)</td>
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For further reading on civic capacity, coproduction, and community assets, see:

- Elinor Ostrom, *Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Development* (Global, Area, and Internation Archive, UC Berkeley, 1997).

Key works by John Dewey and Lawrence Cremin include:


**Lawrence Cremin, “Public Education and the Education of the Public,” Teachers College Record, Volume 77, Number 1, 1-12.**

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4 For information on the initiative, see [http://www.kettering.org/achievementgap](http://www.kettering.org/achievementgap).
A Diagnostic Approach to Learning-Based Change

Kettering Foundation studies the things that people need to do to fulfill their responsibilities in democratic governance. As such, democracy is seen not as a destination—which when reached will deliver particular outcomes—but as the ongoing journey of people struggling with challenges to their collective ability to rule themselves. The research is therefore focused on innovation in the key practices that define the roles of citizens in determining the direction and character of collective acting.

By Randall Nielsen
Those responsibilities can be especially daunting for people attempting to collectively respond to economic change. While people can and do respond individually to change in economic conditions, they often do not see ways that they, or anything they have access to, can affect the economic conditions in the places where they live. The economic futures of their communities can seem to be out of their control.

When widely shared, that sense of incapacity is a fundamental threat to the civic health of communities. The problem is not only that things that could improve economic conditions go undone, it is the uncertainty and fear brought by economic change can lead people toward centralized or expert-driven means that promise quick relief. We see this in reports from places attempting the transition to more democratic society like Russia and South Africa. We have seen it in reports from places like Uniontown, Alabama, as well. It is a common version of the story of the sidelining of citizens as collective actors.

Yet we also know that places that have prospered through time are living histories of civic innovation and resilience. Prosperity emerges in environments where people can discover ways to create change by recognizing and acting on new opportunities and can respond to change in conditions from outside sources. While the capacity to make sound decisions among known alternatives is crucial, taking responsibility for change also depends on the discovery of ways to deal with challenges that are fundamentally uncertain. That suggests a need to explore ways that people can learn to take more active and productive roles . . .

The group has convened at the Kettering Foundation for workshops, monthly conference calls, and through a project website that provides a forum and a hub for reports and related materials.

When we first met in late 2009, the group agreed to an interest in what could help initiators of civic engagement efforts more effectively align their endeavors with what is known about what makes public life work and develop. The interest resulted from a diagnosis that we all shared at least to some extent: that many so-called engagement efforts are not so aligned, and therefore—regardless of the instrumental outcomes—do not result in a greater capacity for public work in the future. Indeed we recognize that the growing professionalization of public engagement endeavors may be resulting in effects on learning that are similar to those identified by McKnight and Kretzmann. Are people learning that public engagement is something that needs to be professionally organized?

While the capacity to make sound decisions among known alternatives is crucial, taking responsibility for change also depends on the discovery of ways to deal with challenges that are fundamentally uncertain. That suggests a need to explore ways that people can learn to take more active and productive roles . . .

in discovering ways to encourage innovation and enterprise in the places where they live.
Key Insights in Design of Efforts

1. Citizens must be engaged if communities are to solve some of their most difficult problems. Such problems have multiple causes and cannot be solved with a technical fix (unlike repairing streets and bridges). Effectively addressing these problems requires citizens to act—and keep on acting. So . . . engage citizens to address community problems.

2. Citizens often think about problems differently than institutions or professionals. Not only do people feel more empowered when they are encouraged to identify and frame the issues related to a problem or opportunity, but they often uncover different solutions than institutions or professionals who are looking at the problem from the lens of their own particular expertise. So . . . recognize the limits of professional expertise.

3. People become engaged only around issues or problems that are of particular interest or concern to them. It’s not realistic to assume that all citizens will be engaged in all issues. The definition of community is therefore dynamic and ever-changing, with groups of people—who may or may not be connected by geographic borders—coming together to solve a problem or take advantage of an opportunity. So . . . start with what people care about.

4. Citizen engagement—and governance—is a skill learned by practice. It’s important to create mechanisms that allow for sustained citizen engagement rather than just one-time events. As citizens gain experience and see that they can make a difference, they may be drawn into issues beyond their initial areas of interest—particularly as they begin to see how many community issues are interrelated. So . . . establish structures that sustain engagement.

5. It’s often most effective to engage citizens within the organizations and networks they are already a part of; we don’t have to start from scratch. It’s likely that they are already talking about a particular issue in these networks and may have the capacity and connections to implement solutions. So . . . engage existing networks.

6. Networks and connections between organizations can multiply the power of civic initiatives and make them truly communitywide, or public. Yet, these connections typically don’t happen by themselves—active intervention is often needed to connect groups that might, at first glance, seem to have very different interests. Even groups working on similar issues often have weak connections. Convenors can help communities redefine their relations, reshape their networks, and restructure their capacity to act. So . . . connect existing networks and stakeholders.

7. When a group of people comes together for a community conversation, there will be tensions between goals, ideas, and values. What may at first seem to be tensions between groups may, with further examination, be seen as common values that everyone shares—such as a desire for freedom or for security—but which pull against each other. Tensions and conflicts do not have to be resolved as long as everyone shows respect for diverse positions. We can agree to disagree. It’s important to recognize tensions from the beginning of a community conversation. So . . . recognize and value tensions.

From, “Community Questions: Engaging Citizens to Address Community Concerns,” by Joe Sumners and Linda Hoke, Kettering Foundation Citizens at Work project.
The following scenario is a generic picture of the learning process citizens go through in tackling a common problem. As citizens learn, communities learn.

To begin, a key to learning in community is creating informal spaces where citizens together can discover their capacities as political actors—ways in which they can engage a particular problem. We might call this a change in mind-set.

To quote William James, late 19th-century American psychologist and philosopher: “The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can...
change their lives by modifying their mental attitudes.” Whether citizens see themselves as responsible for solving their problems and able to generate change—or choose to leave solutions to others, especially government—is critical.

That change in mind-set normally takes place as citizens talk with each other about a problem they see as hurting their interests. In every community every day in countless places, people talk about problems that affect them. Kettering president David Mathews often calls these conversations “the political wetlands.”

In some communities, we can identify spaces where people actually gather regularly to talk—a particular coffee shop, bar, workplace, or at a social gathering about a problem that affects her or him. They begin to name the problem in human—not expert—terms that permit them to see their interests reflected. They may decide to meet informally without yet knowing what specific action might be possible. They ask who else needs to be at the meeting to throw light on all sides of the problem.

Second, citizens’ decision to act. The turning point from recognition of a problem that is hurting people to a decision that something must be done and then to a decision that they themselves can and must act seems to lie in citizens’ discovery of something they personally can do that they believe can make a difference and in their belief that others are likely to join them in such action. They make it their own problem. This exploratory space also provides a venue to begin acquiring skills of collective work and testing others’ willingness and capacity for such work.

Third, selection of an instrument for change. Together or with a catalyst organization, citizens decide to use a particular instrument for change—the “something” they can do. They must choose an instrument suited both to their capacities and to the nature of the problem they have named. Is the problem primarily a technical issue of how best to achieve a practical objective? Or are people deeply divided by what they most value or by moral disagreement over what should be done? Or are there deep underlying relational differences that prevent the people affected from working together?

Because citizens will need to work with others to discover what they can do to influence change, the practical challenge is to make those spaces places where citizens can transform unproductive or destructive relationships into the relationships necessary for them to learn and act together. Politics is about relationship. These must be spaces in which citizens can learn to relate to others who are different and whom they may disdain, dislike, fear, or even hate.

A small group of citizens together may have the capacity to initiate and organize change on their own. But often they may turn to citizens’ organizations that have developed a particular instrument for generating change to learn whether it is consistent with their purposes. Such an instrument may be the catalyst that precipitates the citizens’ decision that there is something they can do. What is important is that the citizens make the decision. A citizens’ organization may act as a catalyst by introducing a change process, training citizens to use it, and helping those citizens connect with others sharing their objective, but the citizens must control.

This may be a moment to cite for illustrative purposes two examples of commonly chosen instruments with which Kettering has worked and the differences between them:

**Learning Communities**

**In every community every day in countless places, people talk about problems that affect them. Kettering president David Mathews often calls these conversations “the political wetlands.”**
Learning Communities

form an organizing committee. The catalyst organization may provide training.

When they have also accomplished other necessary tasks—funding, a meeting place, assignment of tasks such as convening, inviting, recording, moderating—they set a time and place to begin and invite participants. Inviting often requires one-on-one meetings to talk more broadly about the problem, to explain the process and the time commitment it will require, and to assess a potential invitee’s capacity to participate constructively.

Next, citizens create a formal space specifically designed for their change instrument.

As this wider circle meets, they work their way through a progression of tasks: (a) They broaden and deepen their diagnosis of the problem through dialogue among a broader range of citizens—a microcosm of the community affected. (b) Depending on the nature of the problem and the relationships of those involved, they may need to spend considerable time probing and beginning to transform their own relationships, which may be causes of the problem. (c) They develop their analysis of the problem, probe its dynamics, begin to talk about possible approaches to dealing with it, and may come to some common sense of direction in which they might explore moving. This is the beginning of a strategy—the link between analysis and action. (d) They may design a complex of interactive steps that could begin to move in the desired direction and draw an ever-widening circle of citizens into engaging the problem, at least in complementary action.

In this space, as they work their way through these tasks together, they learn to create a cumulative agenda; to talk analytically and empathetically; to relate differently by thinking together rather than confronting, to create a common body of knowledge. They develop capacities to become boundary-spanners in communities—both practical skills as agenda-setters, speakers, and analysts and relational skills in bridging deep human divides. These are the capacities they need as political actors.

As citizens implement an action plan in broadening circles, they constantly take stock. This is a process of joint learning.

In an open-ended political process, citizens cannot necessarily know at the beginning exactly what the process will produce. Each concrete step forward may produce learning that makes possible achievements that were not possible before. Continuous evaluation of progress together generates learning and deepens their relationship—their capacity to make mid-course corrections and to tackle new problems or opportunities as they arise.

Power is the capacity to influence the course of events. Citizens can generate the power to accomplish their goals when they discover that they can be capable political actors. As they learn, the community learns.

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The school board reacted by filling the empty seats at Aiken with students expelled from other schools or whose parents did not designate a high school for them. Many students were there involuntarily. With few neighborhood children attending, outside students transported in rampant discipline problems and dismal performance metrics. By 2005, the perception of Aiken as a hopeless “school of last resort” populated with “the worst of the worst” had become deeply rooted. Residents saw little reason to support the school because “those aren’t even our kids,” and Aiken became an unwanted entity, isolated from the surrounding community.

Residents soon saw the effects a failing public school could have on a neighborhood. Property values dropped and potential home buyers looked elsewhere. Aiken was College Hill’s largest source of calls to police, primarily for fights and drugs, occasionally for weapons. Nearby residents were infuriated by students blocking street traffic, trespassing, and vandalizing. Business owners complained of unruly students loitering during school hours. As the exodus of College Hill students from Aiken continued and the school spiraled downward, the community deemed it unworthy of any effort to change its fate.

A single resident, fed up with loitering truants and the staggering number of police runs to the school, sent a personal e-mail to everyone on her community list. With the subject line “Whose School Is This Anyway?” she outlined the school’s failings and her frustration, urged residents to take ownership of the school, and invited all, including Aiken principals and staff, to meet. Her rallying cry “We have to do something!” sparked what would become a civic movement.

A large number of residents and Aiken staff responded. The residents were not part of any organization but a broad-based collection of like-minded individuals with various reasons for participation, no background in education, and no children attending Aiken. With brutal honesty, these residents raised specific criticisms, declared the status quo intolerable, and...
demanded change. Some administrators were defensive; some teachers were in tears as they acknowledged problems but had no idea how to change course. The staff explained obstacles to progress to help frame critical issues. Many students had absent parents, lived in poverty, and lacked essential clothing and necessities. Residents were willing to help meet basic needs but faced with overwhelming and complex societal issues, the group struggled for direction.

At the urging of the community, the separate schools were consolidated, and a new principal was assigned to Aiken. Committed to a community partnership, the principal disclosed the extent of the school’s problems so innovative solutions could be discussed. Residents were shocked at the number of students dealing with pregnancy, untreated illness and injuries, malnutrition, substance abuse, and violence or a complete lack of support at home. Students with disabilities comprised approximately 45 percent of the population. More citizens came to realize that accountability for education cannot solely rest on the school’s shoulders. The community assigned liaisons to the school and meetings between administrators and residents continued.

As this collaboration was starting to develop, the Cincinnati school board announced that Aiken was slated to be demolished and replaced with a state-of-the-art school. A large faction of residents, uninvolved in the Aiken partnership, organized in protest. They wanted Aiken closed and razed, arguing that a new building could not transform Aiken into a place of learning. These residents viewed the Aiken plan as a waste of tax dollars and suggested the land be sold for other development. Their common response to the prospect of losing the school and its students was, “Good riddance.” While other neighborhoods might mourn the loss of a local school, many College Hill residents, given a choice, preferred no local public high school to having Aiken.

Amid the swirl of heated rhetoric surrounding Aiken’s future, the grassroots group, in conjunction with the principal and staff, hunkered down to deliberate issues and define roles and goals. A comprehensive plan was agreed upon in which Aiken instituted policies to address residents’ grievances, including mandatory uniforms to deter truancy, a cell phone ban, and strict disciplinary rules. The academic program was retooled, expectations were raised, and a new culture of learning took shape. Community members pressured the school board to allow systemic changes and to revise enrollment procedures so Aiken was no longer the “dumping ground” for expelled and unassigned students. Residents committed to support Aiken’s efforts and build relationships with students for integration into the community and off-campus socialization.

Over time, the residents clamoring to close Aiken fell silent as they saw students volunteering at clean-up events, serving at community potluck dinners, and assisting senior citizens. Community members and organizations donated basic necessities and uniforms, sponsored and attended school events, provided incentive awards, and helped involve students’ parents in the school. Students reported their achievements at community council meetings, and while there, observed real-life lessons in democracy. A local retirement community established an internship program to provide students with work experience for school credit, allowing them to learn workplace skills and develop bonds with elderly residents. One resident organized and financed a bus trip to a downtown restaurant for students interested in learning etiquette and improving social skills. At every opportunity, neighborhood organizations publicized the Aiken students’ community work and personal successes at meetings, while local newsletters published photo-laden articles. In a partnership strengthened by continuous communication and joint efforts, Aiken and the community continued to fulfill their agreed-upon responsibilities to each other.

Ever so gradually, a change in perception occurred as residents interacted with students and saw their determination to seize learning opportunities and succeed despite daunting disadvantages. When students and residents understood that each group was trying to connect with the other, relationships and mutual trust began to develop. For the students, the “light bulb” realization that the community truly supported them came when resi-

A single resident inspired a grassroots group which evolved into what Kettering might call a “community board of education.” This group—and the community—had come to realize that even if the students were “not our kids,” Aiken was “our school in our community.”

dents raised $8,000 in 8 days to fund college tours for 20 students who otherwise would have been unable to participate. Further deepening relationships, Aiken has hosted an annual Community Appreciation Breakfast to recognize the wide range of community support of the students.

Years of partnership between the school and the community are paying dividends. Police runs are now rare, disciplinary problems are minimal, the graduation rate has increased, and a significant percentage of students are bound for college or additional education. By 2010, Aiken’s state ranking had risen three levels, from Academic Emergency to Effective, falling just shy of an Excellent rating. Each success encouraged all parties to work harder, and these statistics followed.

Spoiler alert: This story does not have a Hallmark television movie happy ending. When separately asked how Aiken became an asset to the community, both
the principal and the resident who initiated the civic alliance responded that calling Aiken an asset is “a bit of a stretch.” Neither believes the community as a whole has embraced the school and its students but described the relationship as one of “tolerance.” While both acknowledged remarkable achievement, they see a work in progress with opportunities to build on relationships and momentum generated by improvement. “Aiken is not an asset … yet.”

The community learned that something as monumental as improving a failing school cannot be accomplished easily or quickly, but that it can be done. A single resident inspired a grassroots group which evolved into what Kettering might call a “community board of education.” This group—and the community—had come to realize that even if the students were “not our kids,” Aiken was “our school in our community.” The growing group mobilized to take ownership of the school and accepted the community’s role in the students’ educational experience as it transcends the classroom. Higher expectations, coupled with community support, increased the students’ expectations for themselves, and those expectations are being met.

Residents discovered that a dynamic citizenry is a powerful force, especially in a partnership. By promoting interaction that shaped the students’ attitudes about themselves and as members of the community, residents also found they weren’t merely helping create a better school, but creating a new culture of learning.

Aiken’s principal recently has been promoted to Director of Innovations for Cincinnati public schools and the community is heavily involved in the search for a new principal who will keep Aiken on its ascending path. The community remains committed to developing a partnership with a new administration to continue Aiken’s transformation from a school of last resort to a school of choice. And in this ongoing journey for improvement, the community is unwilling to take even a single step backward.

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The story of Mobile, Alabama, illustrates that action linking communities and schools works. Schools, classrooms, teachers, and student achievement scores improved. The achievement gap between those in poverty and those not in poverty and black and white students closed. Citizens believed that because of their work, students were learning more and had more opportunities then before. There are more students achieving at higher levels in Mobile than at any time in the community’s history. The community also benefitted with more economic opportunities for more of its citizens. Anyone you ask—from the superintendent of schools to the mayor to the Chamber of Commerce—will tell you that the community played a critical role in the process.

This is a story about Mobile’s success, which actually began as failure. The history of Mobile—its struggles, failures, and successes—created the “civic fabric” that served as the foundation for the development of a civic infrastructure and framework that ultimately transformed the city’s schools and community.

In Mobile, three generations of citizens had grown up in a public school system so poorly funded that the community had accepted marginal performance as the norm. Mobile had once been a prominent symbol of hope and leadership in the state. The first public school bell rang in Alabama at Mobile’s Barton Academy in 1836. And in 1854, the city’s public school system became the model for the state education system. By the 1970s and 1980s, however, Mobile’s school system was mired in conflict and philosophical differences, which led to negative attitudes in the community and deficit funding. The schools themselves were a mix of dreadful conditions and models of excellence. Citizens were angry and held little confidence in the school system’s leadership. Strife among the leaders was frequent and the tenure of superintendents short and often ineffective. In the 15 years from 1973 to 1998, the Mobile County Public School System had 7 superintendents.

Over decades, civic pride eroded as the nation pointed its finger at Alabama, with the state ranking last in spending for the education of its children. Mobile was ranked last in the state. This crisis was a
result of decades of apathy by elected officials with only selective improvements to the schools, leading to pockets of excellence and success but only for some. Though rarely openly discussed, the public indifference could be linked to Mobile’s segregationist past. Until the 2001 ad valorem tax increase, proposed taxes had not increased school funding since 1961, two years before the schools were desegregated. The failure to approve additional revenue in 1988, 1992, and 1999 is well documented. Each of these was spearheaded by the business community in partnership with local elected officials.

At the same time Mobile was creating its civic fabric. The Public Education Coalition was convening citizens from the mid-1980s to the 1990s, comprising a loose-knit group of advocates and civic leaders with a collective sense of the issues, a shared language for what they were dealing with, and a conviction that the schools’ problems should and could be addressed. The community was ready to go to work. In 2001, voters in Mobile County approved a property tax linked to public education. This was the first successful tax increase for public schools in more than 40 years. Due to constitutional limits on the state’s ability to levy taxes, schools in Alabama are chronically underfunded. The passage was not considered a mandate. Voters expected to see results for those tax dollars. They expected to see changes in how the system operated. The demand for accountability increased. The citizens voted that not only did they need to do something about the county’s schools, they wanted to. An intensive public-engagement effort, coupled with a specific reform strategy, initiated the momentum for change.

Creating the Civic Fabric

David Mathews in For Communities to Work suggests that “by a ‘public’, we at the foundation, mean a diverse body of people joined together in ever-changing alliances to make choices about how to advance their common well-being. By an ‘engaged public’, we mean a committed and interrelated citizenry rather than a persuaded populace.” In Leading Change, John P. Kotter suggests that there are eight steps involved in any organizational transformation. The first three steps: creating a sense of urgency, building the guiding team, and creating a shared vision are all involved in creating the civic fabric of a community. The earned currency the community will stand on when it names and owns its problems is a result of how well that civic fabric is constructed. A fabric made up of a team of people that nobody appointed; that met and talked to lots of different people and wouldn’t quit no matter what. A group so tenacious and committed that giving in to status quo would never be the norm. This fabric would contain a leaderful community—a broad-based group that represented the whole community. The leaderful community would not only build the leadership capacity with the “usual suspects” but would actively seek out the marginalized and typically disenfranchised and would develop specific strategies of getting them into the room and at the community table. A leaderful community knows that it needs one another to be better and stronger and that it needs to include both skeptics and advocates. The civic fabric would consist of continuous learning rather than declarations of victory; of knowledge learned vs. knowledge given. It would recognize leadership throughout the community rather than “the leaders.” The civic fabric of a community is woven over time and experience. Once handcrafted, it serves as the core belief and value system of a community—its very character and the definition of how it does its business.

Developing the Civic Infrastructure and Community Framework

Creating the civic infrastructure and framework in order to work included developing and identifying nurturing networks (civic brigade) and constructing an armada of initiatives to enable action and create learning communities hooked on progress, not success. This would require alignment of community resources; people, time, and money, and the development of an accountability mechanism to make it stick. In 2001, the Public Education Network received support from the Annenberg Foundation to lead a bold set of initiatives that were designed to stimulate and support public responsibility for public education. Mobile was one of the selected sites that worked to forge a stronger and more durable role for the public in the reform of its public schools. The goal was an active, informed
constituency, broadly based in the community, that would hold a shared vision of school reform and would hold the school system accountable for delivering on that vision. The participating communities were expected to lay the groundwork for democratically determined education policies and services that would have staying power. The initiatives were designed to break out of stereotypical images of public engagement. The aim was to support active communitywide public participation in determining policy directions and holding the school system accountable. As evaluator of the initiatives, Policy Studies Associates (PSA) documented the initiatives. Based on comprehensive analysis, they concluded that in one of the sites—Mobile, Alabama—“the initiative organized broad-based public participation and that policy and practice have changed in response to public engagement.” In Mobile, three strategies became the focus of efforts: a citizen-driven, long-range plan for school improvement, a data-driven system for decision making, and an accountability mechanism to ensure movement toward a strategic plan. Successful education reform requires a broad and sustainable coalition of support that involves little p politics at its core. It also implies the implementation and institutionalization of policies, not just public endorsement, of the desire for change. The internal/external infrastructure is vital to policy change and creating the political will to make sure that the desired change happens.

**Conclusion**

Civic capacity is about various sectors of the community coming together in an effort to solve a major problem. In our case that problem was our public schools. In Mobile, history had proven that education reform was not rocket science, but, very definitely political science. Researchers, educators, and reformers alike knew what sustainable reform looked like. The missing ingredient had been the public.

Reforming public schools is a political act, particularly if we are to achieve the levels of social equity and well-being to which we all aspire. So many of the solutions rest in the political realm at local, state, and national levels. Traditionally, for us, the public had been called upon to support public education, either by voting in additional revenue or volunteering in the classroom at the local school. They had been asked to participate in certain activities rather than as true partners and owners of the school system. We created the civic fabric and infrastructure intentionally to allow and prepare us to address the realities of how far off track our public education system was, especially for our minority and low-income students and others for whom our system was not working. To tackle the big issues like closing the achievement gap, increasing the graduation rate, decreasing the dropout rate, reforming high schools to its requirements of workforce and 21st-century skills requires both civic fabric and infrastructure. These are both unique to place and cannot be replicated through template.

Having worked in 11 communities so far it is clear that there are lessons learned: 1) “Ya gotta wanna” is an important first step. All 11 wanted to mirror the work that had occurred in Mobile and wanted a script and process. 2) There is no script and the process should be guided by the civic fabric of the community. No process will get you to long-term sustainability unless it builds on the beliefs, values, and norms of the designated community. The community is simply not ready for the investment over time and more often are interested in quick fixes, assigning blame, and setting unreal expectations for “someone or something” to do. 3) This isn’t about replicating the Mobile model but it is about creating a leaderful community that is continually learning from others; not imitating but adapting to its own journey. 4) This is a movement; not an event. 5) It’s about a community writing its own story. And, 6) it is about learning how to fail successfully and not giving up the fight.

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On a sunny winter day in Baldwin County, Alabama, I drove a rented SUV down a paved road that eventually became a gravel road, a dirt road, and then seemingly no road. David Mathews; his wife, Mary; Davida Hastie, a local historian; and I were looking for the site of the first public school in Alabama. Of course we knew that short of doing an archaeological excavation, we weren’t going to find the exact spot where the school sat. But just visiting the actual place, which is still quite rural and heavily forested with tall pine trees evoked a glimmer of what it might have been like to live in that area so many years ago.

By Melinda Gilmore

Remembering the Public’s Role

Early Public Education in Alabama
When I started working at the Kettering Foundation in the summer of 1999, I had no idea that it would lead to a deep immersion in early education research, particularly in looking at education in six counties in southwest Alabama. David Mathews was in the initial stages of writing a book about public education, using Alabama, his home state, as a source for an extended example of how the first public schools were created. To be honest, I doubt I’d given much thought to the public’s role in education, let alone what pioneer schools might have been like, much beyond reading Laura Ingalls Wilder’s books as a child. I attended public schools, and as an adult, I see the value in them as an integral part of the community and a common experience many of us share. Once I was immersed in this work, I could immediately see the relevance of this history to our experiences today.

Hands-on research took me to Alabama a number of times. Opening up archival boxes of materials led to little treasures that helped to fill in gaps in the history we were trying to unearth. In some cases, primary sources, such as a woman’s diary, photographs, and maps, would lead us to new information. Reel upon reel of microfilm, preserving Mobile’s first newspapers, helped bring into focus a pattern of public education in the city and its surrounding communities. When I wasn’t in Alabama, we had access to materials at the Alabama Department of Archives and History through a researcher who I came to know well. He was particularly helpful with finding documents on the government’s role in early education.

At times, I wondered whether my colleagues at the foundation thought we had been led astray, that we were spending too much time on “that Alabama book” and that it had little to do with Kettering’s research. And yet, for me, it became clear that it had everything to do with that research. Knowing more about the early history of public education revealed what David Mathews has suspected and other scholars, including Lawrence Cremin, have written about: that education is something created by communities, for communities. Today, some might say, the public schools are no longer the public’s schools. Clearly, at some point we lost track of our educational history. Telling that story would be powerful, not only for the history itself, but also because it would help us to know something about community and education today.

We found that long before government got involved—before the state legislature officially chartered public education, before there was a state superintendent and strict evaluation measures—schools were created to fill a community need. Community members were actively involved in providing education. We could have been examining education in any state. The geographical details and the names of key players would change, of course, but essentially, this could be the story of the creation of schooling in the United States.

Many, many hours of research, writing, and revision eventually resulted in the publication of David Mathews’ book, Why Public Schools? Whose Public Schools? What Early Communities Have to Tell Us (NewSouth Books, 2003). In that text, Mathews explains that people created the first schools in Alabama to serve their communities, no matter how small or primitive. As he notes, “schools enjoyed broad support in communities because they were seen as extensions of the communities; they were the public organized to make learning available.” But why has the relationship between the schools and the public that first created them changed so much over time?

In Alabama, the first schools can be traced back to 1799, when John Pierce established a public school in Tensaw, Alabama, on Boatyard Lake in what is now Baldwin County. (The very school we went looking for.) At that time, there were roughly 2,000 people living in the area—a school was certainly needed. Pierce had taught in Indiana before heading south, so he had experience with educating children. But he was not just an itinerant teacher; he was a member of the community and later became the postmaster for a number of years. He taught children from all backgrounds. In his 1851 history, A.J. Pickett writes that the students were “mixed in blood” and had skin “of every hue.” Although we don’t know all of the details of the school, we do know the names of some of the families who sent their children there, including the Durants, Mimses, Taits, and Weatherfords. The Tensaw School, like many of the time, was a “blab school,” meaning that lessons were learned through oral repetition.

Communities like Tensaw were lucky because they had an experienced teacher available. Other places, however, didn’t have this luxury. Parents started many of the first schools, and instruction might have been held in someone’s cabin until a schoolhouse could be built. A family member might have taught courses until a more experienced teacher could be hired. Mathews explains that many parents “acted in the interest both of their families and the settlements that hoped to grow into communities. Ultimately they did more than open a single school; they made education a tradition. When these founders died, others took up the

Although there are few records of the earliest schools, they do “suggest [the founders] had strong civic interests and spent a good deal of their time in community-building.”
Funding for the first schools initially came directly from parents, but later, subscriptions, essentially donations, allowed community members to contribute. Subscribers could donate money, land, or other needed items, and often their generosity would also give them voting power. Communities worked through formal and informal associations to create their schools, including women’s associations, neighbors working in ad hoc groups, churches, independent teachers, and local governments. Some support for schools also came from the state legislature. And communities could sell a 16th section of land in each township in order to generate funds. Values of this land varied dramatically throughout the state, however, which meant that some schools had far fewer resources because their land was less desirable. In addition, population size varied, which meant that a more heavily populated area could be at a disadvantage.

Over time, education became more formalized, and a number of types of schools were created, including common schools and academies. Typically, these schools covered primary education, although some also had secondary instruction or even college-preparatory courses. At minimum, reading, writing, and arithmetic were taught. But many schools also included history, geography, public speaking, and even music, for both boys and girls. It was not uncommon for schools to sponsor “public examinations,” which included speeches, plays, and recitals, so that members of the community could come and see what young people were learning—an early form of accountability.

In cities like Mobile, a wide variety of opportunities for learning were available. Itinerant teachers and ministers provided classes. Seminaries for girls were established. And in 1826, an act was passed to create a board of school commissioners for the community. They were elected by citizens every five years to manage the public schools. One board member explained their mission, which was “to furnish public and popular instruction for the children of the great body of the population of the City.”

With overwhelming support of the public, Alabama’s legislative assembly passed the Free Public School Act in 1854, which provided more equitable funding for schools throughout the state and a free primary education to children. The passage of this act signaled a shift in thinking from each community providing education for its children to a sense of collective responsibility for all children throughout the state. People supported this legislation for a variety of reasons. Communities were concerned about their way of life and knew that good schools would mean good communities. Communities were also concerned about benevolence; they wanted to avoid a social hierarchy that would be exacerbated by the inability of some to pay for a portion of their schooling. Citizens also supported this measure because the money available to support education had been inequitable because 16th-section land values varied. Legislators supported the bill because they were concerned about economic development and preparing people to be good citizens and because they believed education is a right for all.

An unintended consequence of the 1854 law was that it resulted in centralized administration of the schools and loss of local control. William Perry, the first state superintendent of education, was “convinced that the public’s schools weren't good schools” and believed in the “absolute necessity of state control.” Curriculum and textbooks were determined at the state level, and new rules required county superintendents to report back to the state on the quality of instruction. The state superintendent also decided how the schools should be administrated. Many of the decisions that had been made at the community level were now centrally decided.

For more than 50 years, Alabamians made their own arrangements for their children to be educated. Although many argue that public education in Alabama began in 1854 when the state took formal responsibility, the schools in the first half of the 19th century were also public. They were created by citizens in local communities for the betterment of their children and ultimately the betterment of their neighborhoods.
communities for the betterment of their children and ultimately the betterment of their neighborhoods. They were funded by voluntary contributions rather than primarily by the state. The beginning of state-supported education may have signaled the shift to believing schools are primarily the realm of government and professionals, and although positive in many respects, it relieved citizens of any responsibility for them. Over time, as generations move forward, the memory of ever having been involved in education has faded.

All of this brings me back to that dusty drive in Baldwin County. What I took away from this project—and a lens I continue to look through today in this work—is the conviction that early schools, whether they were in New York or California, Michigan or Alabama, were created by people who cared about their communities and therefore the education of young people. People have forgotten the early history of public education in the United States. People see education as a service that is provided rather than as something they are a part of. Unfortunately, much of Kettering’s research today points to people feeling shut out of the education of young people. They say, “those aren’t our schools.” But the truth is, at one point, they were intimately theirs. We can’t return to a time when individual citizens build the schoolhouse and hire the teacher, of course, but some amount of school ownership seems not only appropriate but also necessary. For many people, educating may be something that primarily happens in schools. And for those who do not have children or whose children are grown, this may be something that doesn’t seem all that important. But some people do recognize that education is not just the responsibility of parents and teachers—the whole community must be involved. Historically, this was certainly the case.

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As an educator for many years, I remember how much I valued the involvement of parents and community in my work—whether I was a teacher, principal, or assistant superintendent. I mention this because although there were many collaborative activities that my colleagues and I initiated to bring resources into our school, it was limited compared to the greater awareness of available resources and the capacity for learning that the community offers. We saw our work as innovative, but it was still based on the traditional model that schools educate. Today, after-school programs that are led by many citizen educators are changing “who educates” and expanding the meaning of education beyond the schools.

In the school where I taught, parents were involved in classes, the cafeteria,
Communities: A Resource

library, on the playground with children, helping teachers, and monitoring special learning group activities. Education scholars have said that parent involvement is important for children’s performance in school. In that regard we did a good job at Hunters Woods School. Parents invited to the school were called on and asked to assist in special tasks. Many parents volunteered, yet, this was always directed by the school.

In a two-day special teaching/learning experiment multiple high-interest classes were offered for students. Students chose classes based on their interests and followed a rotational schedule. Nearly a hundred different choices were available with a faculty exclusively made up of community members, including business people, parents, homemakers, lawyers, carpenters, photographers, stay-at-home moms, a seamstress, artists, dancers, builders, scientists, a former professional football player, a hair stylist, a gymnast, a drama coach, and many others. The classes were offered by these talented and willing community members for two full days of experiential learning. The community shared its vast resources, which expanded learning way beyond the school’s curriculum.

In Timber Lane School, where I was the principal, we expanded our reach even further. Often parent volunteers nearly outnumbered the teachers and staff in the school. These dedicated volunteers, no doubt helped lower the pupil-adult ratio in most classrooms and special classes. Parents were trained by Timber Lane staff to work with students teaching one on one as well as in small groups. They tutored and reinforced math and reading skills. They assisted teachers and students with science and art projects. Students, teachers, and the school benefited. Parents involved knew they were appreciated and made a difference.

Students visited local and national museums, historical sites, the observatory, local farms, and businesses of different occupations and discovered possible careers. Again, we connected outside the school and students benefited.

The school’s outreach to use community resources was greater, yet relationships beyond parents were few. For schools, it seemed parents were the community. Only a tangential relationship existed with the larger community. However, local and state service providers and schools did collaborate extensively to meet the special needs of young people.

Of course, during a bond issue campaign the school district reached out to the community-at-large for support. Over the years with growing dissatisfaction with schools, bond issues failed and separation of schools from their communities deepened. In fact, for many school districts various sectors of the community became less available to the schools. This included aging citizens with no children in school and the business sector.

In a large, urban school district, I directed the superintendent’s flagship initiative, a vehicle to reengage an alienated business community with the public schools. The superintendent asked businesses not for money, but for their time, skills, and knowledge to strengthen the learning experiences in five key academic and career areas pertinent to the future job market and economic development in the city.

The business community was hands on and provided creative problem solving. They designed and wrote curricula, taught classes, and monitored the progress of each program. They trained and provided teachers with paid internships and students with summer work experiences. The business participants demonstrated a strong sense of ownership and responsibility for these programs. These resources were used both inside and outside schools. An environment for learning was created, encouraging teachers and students to advance their knowledge and experience beyond the traditional textbook curricula.

These programs were designed to create change in the student’s academic performance and improve the school district’s relationship with the business community. It was established to create a shift in the way education was delivered over the long term. These above examples are shared to point out the value of community resources that has been recognized by citizens, schools, and districts for decades. Yet, the push back continues. Who owns education? The schools? The public/community? How do schools and communities work together to ensure the best of both are available to educate and develop young people?

The scholarly theories and research of thoughtful educators and historians, including John Dewey, Lawrence Cremin, Ronald Edmonds, and recently Edmund Gordon, recapture our attention on the importance of the public’s role and

Resources often were discovered in unlikely places. For instance, a horse farmer allowed young people whose needs were not being met in school to work with the horses. These students improved in school and strengthened learning skills through their acquired knowledge and understanding of horses.
youth and their community. Relationships formed across traditional boundaries of separation. Citizens of different races, economic and cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and political persuasion worked together to achieve mutual goals.

We noticed that in most communities, individuals, faith-based, nonprofit, social, and civic organizations initiated and led after-school programs. Although most efforts were not communitywide initiatives, rather, launched by individuals or separate organizations, they engaged others, including schools. Resources often were discovered in unlikely places. For instance, a horse farmer allowed young people whose needs were not being met in school to work with the horses. These students improved in school and strengthened learning skills through their acquired knowledge and understanding of horses. Equally important, these programs demonstrate the value and necessity for public engagement in education. Their success has implications for education reform. Yes, education, not school reform.

Authentic reform, it seems, continues to elude schools. Schools are an important part of the community, not the reverse. Yet the conversation about education always ends up in an emotional interaction about schools. In a democracy, schools are not the sole responsible entity for education. Rather, as an institution within the community, they are collaborators with and for the community. Is it possible that when the community works, then, so do schools? Traditionally, schools were established to reduce privilege among citizens and were designated the source for academic achievement. Community educators develop life skills, provide mentors, nutrition, role models, character development, and numerous resources that support the development of the whole child.

There was a major observation of these cutting-edge programs that was repeatedly noticed. Participants did not know each other, even those from the same locality and region. Most participants did not communicate with other programs or communities. Does this minimize the availability of resources? This was true of two programs engaged in this work and residing in close proximity to one another. They were located in different cities less than 20 miles apart. Later, after meeting, the two program directors exchanged resources that benefited youth in both groups.

Some of the challenges reported by programs may have limited this kind of peer relationship. One issue was funding. In the survey administered in the study, funding was frequently cited as the biggest obstacle. Additional challenges included the loss of leaders, change of school superintendents, a diminished economy, and recruiting staff and volunteers for the long-term.

A teacher involved in a collaborative initiative between her school and local citizens pointed out an important challenge that inhibits collaboration. Administrators and teachers fear a backlash from community, parents, and students that could further reduce community support, heighten parent flight, or increase tension among students. Fear is definitely a “game stopper” for communication, collaboration, and access to community resources. Schools and their districts have been consistently under fire since the early 1980s, particularly for issues like safety, low test scores, and accreditation. If we sit in fear and do nothing, nothing will happen, and things will remain the same. The public recognition of its abilities and its available resources to make a difference in the lives of young people may be more significant at this time, than at any other time in recent history.

In the current reality, families, schools, businesses, communities, and grantmakers are economically stressed. Apathy, resignation, and the loss of power to recognize the value of community resources can easily displace the energy and synergy of engaged citizens resolving their own problems.

Even under these difficult circumstances the most vital resource is still there, human capital. Is there any better time to access the creativity, skills, and wisdom of the numerous resources in our communities?

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Creating a Culture of Learning

Neighborhood Learning Communities in St. Paul

By Lisa Boone-Berry

Through their work at the University of Minnesota’s Center for Democracy and Citizenship, Nan Kari and Nan Skelton have learned something. Actually, they’ve learned many things. And what they learned, in turn, led to more insights, which eventually led to grassroots changes in the education of children in the West Side and East Side neighborhoods of St. Paul, Minnesota. The changes and the journey to implement these changes are detailed in Kari’s and Skelton’s most recent report to the foundation, Creating a Culture of Learning in St. Paul: A Framework to Improve Children’s Learning.
perhaps the seed for future change was planted in 1996 when, in the tradition of hull house, the jane addams school for democracy came to be. this space was designed to address the educational needs of west side immigrant youth and their families. staff from the center for democracy and citizenship, students and faculty from the university of minnesota and the college of st. catherine, and west side community members peopled the jane addams school. those who worked at the school developed learning theories that crossed cultural boundaries and used multicultural perspectives to foster learning and community for the children and families who came to the school and to further their own knowledge of learning.

the educational system in st. paul’s west side, as in other areas of the united states, functioned on the theory that learning happened in school, with school meaning “in the school building.” local school officials and west side citizens recognized that there were problems. but who defined those problems and who “owned” those problems? those questions led to an even more frustrating one, who needed to “adapt” so change could take place? the schools? the children and their families?

as is purported in many kettering foundation reports and findings, the most successful problem resolutions begin with correctly naming the issue at hand. the same is true here. west side neighborhood residents saw themselves labeled as “immigrants,” a term which carried with it misconceptions and potential misunderstandings. as one would expect, language barriers existed, and the families’ frustrations went unheard by the school administration. the community was disconnect ed from the schools and their children’s pursuit of learning was disconnected from their cultural background.

the schools in st. paul’s west side were struggling and the staff at jane addams helped them define issues of concern. the neighborhood’s immigrant youth and their families had a hunger for a deeper learning that would expand into and connect with the surrounding neighborhood. to create the “fullness of learning” that they sought would require learning inside and outside the school buildings of the west side. it was determined that a culture of learning already existed piecemeal in the neighborhood. the youth in the west side community needed access to these resources. connecting and opening up these resources for the residents created, in essence, a neighborhood learning community. neighborhoods that provided needed traction for other innovations to follow. the idea, however, did not originate with organization staff but with residents who had long thought about a neighborhood trolley. [emphasis added.]

creating a culture of learning in st. paul

details some of the characteristics of a healthy learning community:

• the programs are learning based and promote lifelong learning.
• the learning community is co-created, using collaborative politics.
• it is place based and creates connections.
• there is structure, with flexibility, fueled by dialogue and reflection.
• the learning community is linked to larger systems and institutions through relationship building.

when developing a learning community, an infrastructure must first be set to not only ensure its functionality, but also to promote its growth. important infrastructure characteristics include:

• access to the programs, providing transportation for all residents
• forming leadership through a coordinating council or similar body
• building new relationships to remain a community connector
• gathering data and evaluating the process consistently
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- Providing for professional development
- Allowing for sharing, reflecting, and celebrating

Of course, none of the above characteristics stands alone; they rely upon each other in order to function well. The time and energy needed to set up a solid infrastructure helps avoid or eliminate future obstacles and tensions.

For example, good leaders allow the working group of citizens and institutional members to work through any issues uncovered while planning aspects of the learning community. Making sure that all people are heard (and that they know they’ve been heard) and helping people to communicate effectively is one way to be certain underlying bad feelings or tensions are avoided.

Allowing for the time needed to build new relationships is also key. A mature relationship is more prone to collaboration rather than simply cooperation. Impatience can be a strong opponent to this concept, but it is important; many projects existed solely as “flash-in-the-pan” events because they lacked the grassroots support that would have given them a toehold in the community. Finally, the report points out the importance of reflection, not metrics, as a way to evaluate the health and growth of a learning community.

This “method of learning” cannot be taught; there are no lesson plans or academic courses available. However, the public work of a learning community can be experienced. It can be discovered while participating in and reflecting on the experiences shared with others while collaborating on this kind of “education,” this public work. And, as in all innovative processes, mistakes and experimentation are beneficial.

Next Steps, Next Questions

In 2009, building on the work of the West Side and East Side neighborhood learning communities, the City of Saint Paul and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship initiated the Learning in Cities project. This project “focuses on creating a culture of learning that spans city neighborhoods. The overall aim is to shift the educational system from a school-centered approach to one that utilizes the agency and responsibility of whole communities, including children, families, and many institutions.”

While the learning community concept is expanding out from the West and East Side neighborhoods, Kari and Skelton know that still larger questions need to be considered in order to continue, or grow, educational reform in the United States. What are the politics needed to change education? What type of language is needed?—a new effective language for education is key. What type of leader is necessary to co-create an environment of cultural change? How can these ideas be introduced?

There is always the chance that the collaborative atmosphere and functionality of the neighborhoods of St. Paul will stand alone as an anomaly that can’t be emulated successfully elsewhere in Minnesota or in the nation. But Kari and Skelton state that theirs has not been a one-step process. The work is constant. It takes continual effort to push away the default, the established system. The reward, however, is worthwhile.

The formation of learning communities in neighborhoods and cities in conjunction with schools opens new possibilities and resources for broadening and improving learning in the United States. Such an effort also creates new opportunities for public work with a wide range of people. It requires an authentic and long-term community engagement process that taps the learning resources embedded in a place. It begins with a large vision and small, steady steps that show visible change.

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In the 2007 report, *Extraordinary Results in Ordinary Communities*, Vaughn Grisham Jr. examines how small towns and rural communities actually function in making decisions—particularly those decisions that are designed to address persistent intractable, community problems. A key question explores the role of the public, how people in communities come to know and understand the issues that affect them and how that understanding influences official decision making.

It is important to emphasize that this study is not an evaluation. Instead, the purpose is to gain insight and to understand community dynamics. With this in mind, there is as much to be learned from mistakes and setbacks as there is from progress and success. In any event, the findings of the report identify some common elements to community problem solving.

The first of these elements is a “Catalyst,” an individual who steps forward in order to get things done, in other words, someone “sick and tired of being sick and tired.” In the report, Catalysts are characterized as strong-willed, passionate, and more concerned with reaching organizational goals rather than on advancing their own self-images. This requires an ability to focus and make personal sacrifices. Of course, they are not without their limitations and they certainly can’t solve the problem alone. What they can do, however, is “create an environment in which things get done.”
Second, leaders, in their understanding that they can’t solve the problem alone, encourage others to take leadership roles. The report refers to these communities as “leaderful,” or containing many leaders. In the absence of institutionalized power, the power of these communities is derived from being inclusive. Similarly, leaders work hard to forge relationships, build coalitions, and create ever-expanding networks. Building and sustaining partnerships was noted as the key to community development, and treating it as an ongoing process is key to sustaining momentum for future issues.

The third element is a recognition that leaders do not work in isolation, but rather in the context of communities that have particular characteristics. These leaders appear to have a deep understanding of the culture of the community in which they’re trying to solve problems. As such, they are able to get the right people or organizations involved. Moreover, when problems did arise, they were able to adapt to the circumstances, thereby uniquely tailoring their response and supporting an iterative process.

Finally, people in the community reflect on what their efforts have wrought, see real consequences, and begin to think about what they might do in the future. As we’ve seen from the articles in this issue exploring McKnight’s research on community assets, people “pondered their own assets, looking first at the internal resources to which they had immediate access, and next, at how to pair these assets with resources that lay beyond the community but to which they could gain access.”

Grisham’s article on extraordinary communities demonstrates how people have changed the place where they live for the better. It does this by first identifying the problem as one of collective learning and then addressing how to go about making changes in collective learning. This, then, promotes a more fully realized notion of education, including what hinders or helps the promotion of that idea.

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The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods
By John McKnight and Peter Block
Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2010
http://www.abundantcommunity.com

In their latest book, The Abundant Community, John McKnight and Peter Block team up to deliver a hearty dose of self-help for people in search of fulfilling community life. Organized into three sections, the book traces the decline of family and community in American society, identifies inherent capacities within neighborhoods that often go untapped, and suggests how to nurture and connect individual capacities to create the associations of public life. A sense of robust and capable citizenship is juxtaposed against a model of consumerism in which professional providers usurp the role of citizens.

The book follows the decline of community to a shift to a consumer-oriented economy in the early 20th century. This new economic order, combined with the increasing demand of large institutions for measurement and standardization, led to the gradual “outsourcing” of community functions (like caring for the elderly) to a growing army of social service professionals. The crisis in the American educational system is used to illustrate the limits of the consumer-oriented professions to fulfill community functions. The authors suggest that the “youth problem” is the result of leaving children’s development and education up to the schools—treating children as mere consumers of educational services without any real purpose in the community. Citing a study in Chicago neighborhoods as a testament to the educative role of communities, researchers found that neighbors’ willingness to intervene when children misbehave is one of the most influential indicators of health and educational outcomes for children (19).

McKnight and Block make the case that professionalization has undermined the ability of families and communities to provide for their basic needs by defining ordinary life conditions as problems requiring expert solutions. In short, what families and communities used to do for themselves, is now provided by professionals, who cannot accommodate the idiosyncrasies inherent in individuals, families, and community life. This kind of consumerism threatens the bedrock of democracy—the capacity of citizens to govern themselves.

Against the demoralizing forces of professionalism and consumerism, McKnight and Block provide a strategy for creating an abundant, healthy public life. For clarity, they distinguish between the terms association (three or more people joined by choice and interest), neighborhood (the place where you live and sleep), and community (both a place and an experience of connectedness). A central concept throughout the book is “community competence”—the capacity of a place to fulfill its residents’ needs (5). People in a competent community believe they have the capacity and responsibility to provide for themselves and their neighbors (66). The authors identify three community properties that create the conditions for community competence (67):
1. A focus on people’s gifts and capacities
2. The nurturing of associational life (the sharing and building of capacities)
3. An ethic of hospitality through the welcoming of strangers and outsiders

To start the process of creating community competence, citizens must identify and make visible the gifts and capacities of people in their neighborhoods. Expanding the focus on individual gifts, the authors provide a list of capacities that are key for the community as a whole, highlighting both the prosperity and the limitations of community life. Two of the capacities identified, “generosity” and “cooperation,” are positioned in opposition to the prevailing theories of resource scar-
articulates hospitality as a kind of free space:

The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness—not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs; speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations (113).

The authors suggest that this friendly ease grows out of gift-centered associations that build trust and friendship and ultimately confidence in one’s community. Whereas a community characterized by fear and insecurity feels threatened by outsiders, a confident community’s hospitality toward outsiders is its signature feature.

McKnight and Block kick off their discussion of hospitality by contrasting their approach to the community organizing of Saul Alinsky. Whereas traditional community organizing develops a common cause among residents by identifying a common enemy and developing an opposition, McKnight and Block advocate for organizing that is more “relationship-based” and in line with the ethic of hospitality. “Bringing people together against an outsider is the opposite of hospitality” (78). Here outsider is being used to represent powerful interests that are perceived as being at odds with the community’s interests, however, the existence of these perceptions, or the reality they may reflect is never discussed. In an expanded discussion, the terms outsiders and strangers represent marginal members and those outside the community. They argue that people who are marginalized and labeled by their deficiencies often have capacities that go untapped, and they suggest the surest way to manage resident deficiencies is to integrate them more fully into the life of the community (137-140). This seems like a reasonable strategy for the cases presented in the book (residents who are disabled, low-income, or immigrants), but does not offer any concrete guidance for dealing with the presence of hostile dynamics in community, like organized crime, domestic violence, or persistent racism.

It is not clear whether a discussion of dealing with issues of contentious conflict is intentionally avoided or whether the reader is to assume that strangers and outsiders represent all potentially conflicting parties—both the powerful and the marginalized—for which hospitality is the recommended approach. If so, the choice to emphasize hospitality and to lump together any and all that fall outside of the community norm manages to circumvent the potentially polarizing discourse of power and difference that can deepen existing socioeconomic divides. In a way, McKnight and Block offer an alternative discourse of welcome and receptivity that doesn’t deny the realities of social and economic exclusion but averts the risk of reinforcing them—at least semantically.

Still, the book seems conspicuously incomplete without a practical strategy for dealing with conflict or a substantive discussion of the tensions inherent in building associations. At times, the authors’ zeal for close-knit community life comes across as overly romantic and may run the risk of oversimplifying the social and economic forces of modern life in order to stress the limitations of consumerism. The authors’ fierce belief in the capacity of community to heal and provide for itself runs in stark contrast to the predominant scholarship that finds communities almost incorrigibly deficient. And perhaps my hesitation with such an optimistic community narrative is symptomatic of the endemic cynicism of professionalism identified at the outset of the book. Indeed, it seems the power of The Abundant Community is not to provide an accurate, or even an entirely realistic account of community, but rather to inspire confidence—to shake the skeptical and guard American citizen suffering from public paralysis out of the grip of consumerism and into action.

—Reviewed by Alexandra Robinson

Alexandra Robinson was a research assistant at the Kettering Foundation from 2008-2011.
The Year in Review

By Amy Lee

Kettering’s program year runs from Labor Day to Labor Day, and at the end of each summer we step back to reflect on what has happened in the foundation research over that time. Here is a summary of major Kettering Foundation news since last fall, along with reflections from David Holwerk, Kettering’s Director of Communications, about his experience since joining the foundation in 2009.

Fall 2010

In October, the Ruth Yellowhawk Fellowship on Native American Forums was established to honor Ruth Yellowhawk, who passed away August 7, 2010, following a two-month bout with cancer. Before she moved to South Dakota, Ruth had been a Program Director at WYSO, a public radio station in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and worked with Kettering and National Issues Forums in NIF’s early days. She had also done research for the foundation showing that a legacy of tribal deliberation has carried over into modern-day decision making.

To honor Ruth and to continue that research, Kettering established the Ruth Yellowhawk Fellowship. Yellowhawk Fellows will be selected on the basis of proposals to tell the stories of either historical or contemporary decision making, including how problems were identified, issues were framed, decisions were made, and actions were taken.

Also in October, the Dartmouth Conference celebrated 50 years of bringing citizens from the United States and Russia together to talk about their lives and what they wanted for their countries and the world. The simple fact that citizens continued their dialogue despite often alarming developments between the two nations is a remarkable and historic achievement. From the participation of Hal Saunders, Phil Stewart, and others in the Dartmouth Conference, Kettering has gained many insights about what people—acting as citizens rather than as politicians, experts, or foreign affairs professionals—can contribute to international peace.
In November, Hal Saunders received the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Award for Excellence in Diplomacy from the American Academy for Diplomacy for his work with the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue. Previous recipients of this award include Kofi Annan, Colin Powell, and George Mitchell.

At the new year, the Cousins Research Group (an internal and somewhat ad hoc group of foundation folks, including president David Mathews, who pull together different strands of research for books, chapters, and articles) created a new list of priorities for 2011. The first priority was three new articles for the Kettering Review, Connections, and the Higher Education Exchange, explicating how the scope of the foundation’s research has broadened from the relationship between the public and the public schools to include all educating institutions and their communities—particularly the culture of learning in communities.

Another major project, carried over from 2010, is an exploration of the “ecology of democracy.” This is a big undertaking, and the book the CRG hopes to produce will carry forward the story that began with Politics for People.

Another large-scale project deals with the impact that federal social policy has had on democracy—intentionally or not. In-house, this is known as the “Of/By/For” project. The CRG has completed major sections on school integration and health care but is still working on other areas like welfare and is also looking into the nature of policy and policymaking.

In January and February, the foundation watched, with the rest of the world, as protests began to ignite around the Arab world. Fortunately, the foundation had its longtime collaborator in this area, the Arab Network for the Study of Democracy, to turn to for firsthand insights into the situation. The Arab Network released an official statement on the situation:

What is happening clearly expresses the yearning of Arab populaces for freedom, dignity, and justice and for their legitimate right to change conditions without violence or war. We, as researchers and activists from Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco, have met for years to establish a network dealing with the study of democracy, mechanisms of democratic transformation, and concepts of citizen deliberation with the goal of change. …We hope that peaceful movements of reform and change prevail throughout the Arab world in order to rebuild our societies and begin living in an age of stability and freedom under the sovereignty of the rule of law. We declare also that fortifying any democratic transformation requires the following:

- Respect for human rights and affirmation of equality among citizens, whether male or female.
- Enacting new legislation that ends the permanent state of emergency and grants the freedoms of political action, including respect for freedom of expression and ratification of new electoral laws guaranteeing equitable representation.
- Judicial reform ensuring the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law over all.
- Public administration reform by enacting laws combating corruption and clientelism.
• Undertaking constitutional reform limiting the absolute powers of presidents or kings and adopting a system of divided and balanced powers.
• Organize free and fair general elections resulting in parliaments that actually represent various political forces, as long as they accept a democratic approach based on popular mandate and peaceful transfers of power.
• Initiate the implementation of economic and financial reforms and development of social policies in order to confront poverty, unemployment, and the other severe crises that afflict broad segments of our societies.
• Each peaceful, democratic path demands wider citizen participation to ensure the sustainability of reform and continuation in the devolution of power. It also requires independence from all negative possible influences from both regional and external actors violating.

By David Holwerk

I arrived at the Kettering Foundation in June 2009 after 30 years as a newspaper journalist, armed with some background on the foundation’s work and a question that I couldn’t answer about my former occupation.

I spent most of my newspaper career working as an editor in charge of opinion pages. In that work, calling on the public to do something—rise up, ask questions, demand answers, take action—is part of the routine. Most of the time, maybe 98 or 99 times out of 100, the public goes on about its business with no indication that it has read or heard about your call to action. But sometimes, that once or twice out of 100, the public would rise up and not only do what you had called for but act independently in ways that were totally unexpected in both their creativity and effectiveness.

I could never figure out what made those occasions different. I couldn’t see that our editorials on those occasions were any better or even markedly different than our work on other occasions. So what, I wondered, had happened in those instances?

I groped for an answer in a paper I wrote for Kettering in 2008 (now, I am thankful to say, it is consigned to the depths of the foundation’s archives). I didn’t get very far, though; I simply didn’t know enough to begin to figure out what the answer might be.

Now, after two years of working here at the foundation, I’ve begun to get an idea about the answer. The answer lay not in what I and other journalists did, but in what was going on among the people who read the newspaper. The difference was civic life.

That concept dawned on me after I had begun wrapping my brain around one of Kettering’s fundamental insights: the six democratic practices. These practices are laid out in various places in the foundation’s publications, most notably perhaps in David Mathews’ Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy.

When I first came across the Six Practices, I wasn’t sure what to make of them. They seemed like a metaphor or a theoretical construct. They kept popping back into my brain, though, and at some point several months after coming to the foundation full-time it dawned on me that they weren’t theoretical or metaphorical at all, but rather a description of life as it is lived by real people in real communities.

I also realized that the way I had been thinking about why the public responded to some editorials put the question backwards. It wasn’t the public response to the editorials that was different. It was that the editorials resonated with (or, in Kettering—speak, aligned with) something that was already going on in the community, completely unbeknownst to me and the other journalists involved.

Since then, I’ve been thinking about how to share this insight with journalists (and, more recently, with other professionals). I’ve tried various approaches over the past few months with opinion journalists in this country and with health journalists in South Africa. I’ve used a different version with broadcasters and still another version with a small group of legislators. I’m on the lookout for other experiments in the same vein—in all instances, beginning with the Six Practices. Two years into this work, I regard these practices as the core of what the Kettering Foundation has to say about the world.

I’m also increasingly sure that we have only begun to explore the ways in which the Six Practices open up opportunities for real people working on real problems in real communities. Working on that should keep me busy for the next couple of years at least.

David Holwerk is Director of Communications and resident scholar at the Kettering Foundation.
In March, Kettering Foundation began distribution of its documentary, *No Textbook Answer: Communities Confront the Achievement Gap*, via public television, with over 60 stations around the country signing on to air the film. Kettering also held some productive research exchanges, particularly one with a new group of public broadcasters and another with teachers using NIF books.

On a related note, Peggy Sparks’ indefatigable efforts to integrate *NIF in the Classroom* materials into Birmingham schools culminated in some of those lesson plans being added to the Alabama state education curriculum.

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**SIX DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES**

Democratic practices are ways citizens can work together—even when they disagree—to solve common problems. They are:

1. Naming problems to reflect the things people consider valuable and hold dear, not expert information alone.

2. Framing issues for decision making that not only takes into account what people value but also lays out all the major options for acting fairly—that is with full recognition of the advantages and disadvantages of each option.

3. Making decisions deliberatively to move opinions from first impressions to more shared and reflective judgment.

4. Identifying and committing civic resources, assets that often go unrecognized and unused.

5. Organizing civic actions so they complement one another, which makes the whole of people’s efforts more than the sum of the parts.

6. Learning together all along the way to keep up civic momentum.

When governments and other institutions align their routines so that they encourage these practices, they can do their work more effectively because their efforts are reinforced by what citizens do.
In May, the foundation hosted its annual Washington briefing sessions at the National Press Club. This year’s event consisted of two discussions, Economic Security: How Can We Take Charge of Our Future? and A Nation of Debtors: Facing the Tough Choices. At these events, Kettering and the National Issues Forums Institute focused on the strategic implications for policymakers of public thinking on these issues. Panelists for the Economic Security discussion included William Barnes of the National League of Cities, David Parkhurst of the National Governors Association, and Stacy Sanders of Wider Opportunities for Women. An audio production by Scott London based on the conversation is due out in late summer.

The second panel, which introduced the new NIF issue guide A Nation of Debtors: Facing the Tough Choices, included former Senator Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, Gail Leftwich Kitch from By the People (MacNeil/Lehrer Productions), Maya MacGuineas of the New America Foundation, Scott Pattison of the National Association of State Budget Officers, Ryan Schoenike of WeCan’tPayThatTab.org, and David Walker of the Comeback America Initiative. Public Agenda’s Jean Johnson moderated the discussion.

The foundation had productive research exchanges with a new group from the National Coalition of State Legislators and another new group of state budget officers. Kettering published new NIF issue guides and videos on immigration, Internet content, the national debt, and youth and violence. Testing has begun on and this fall should see the release of the first NIF in the Classroom “Historic Decisions” curriculum, 1776: What Should We Do? Kettering also released We the People Politics, a new report from longtime colleague Harry Boyte. The report argues that it is crucial for Americans to recover and expand on a politics of deliberation and public work, with deep roots in the populist tradition, in order to re-create civic agency and gain some control over our collective future. Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda published a long-awaited report on the accountability movement: Don’t Count Us Out: How an Overreliance on Accountability Could Undermine the Public’s Confidence in Schools, Business, Government, and More.

Planning has begun for the 25th anniversary of Kettering’s exchange with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, as well as plans for upcoming monthly research sessions, which will include visits from colleagues Tim Eatman of Imagining America, Romand Coles of Northern Arizona University, Craig Calhoun of the Social Science Resource Council, and Diana Hess from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
Youth and Violence: Reducing the Threat

Violence has become a pervasive presence in the United States, especially violence involving young people. Far too many children are at risk of becoming victims or perpetrators themselves. Whether it manifests itself on the screen or on the streets, the central question remains: how can we reduce violence in the lives of young people?

12-page NIF Issue Guide $2.49

What Should Go on the Internet?

Privacy, Freedom, and Security Online

The Internet has become an integral part of American life. But as its presence in our lives has grown, so have concerns about its dangers. It’s time to consider our priorities with regard to protecting privacy, preserving free speech, and ensuring security. Can we—or should we—regulate what goes on the Internet?

12-page NIF Issue Guide $2.49

To order these NIF publications, contact Agency for Instructional Technology at 1-800-600-4060. You can also FAX your order to 1-812-333-4218 or send an e-mail to info@ait.net. For a complete listing of NIF issue guides, visit www.nifi.org.