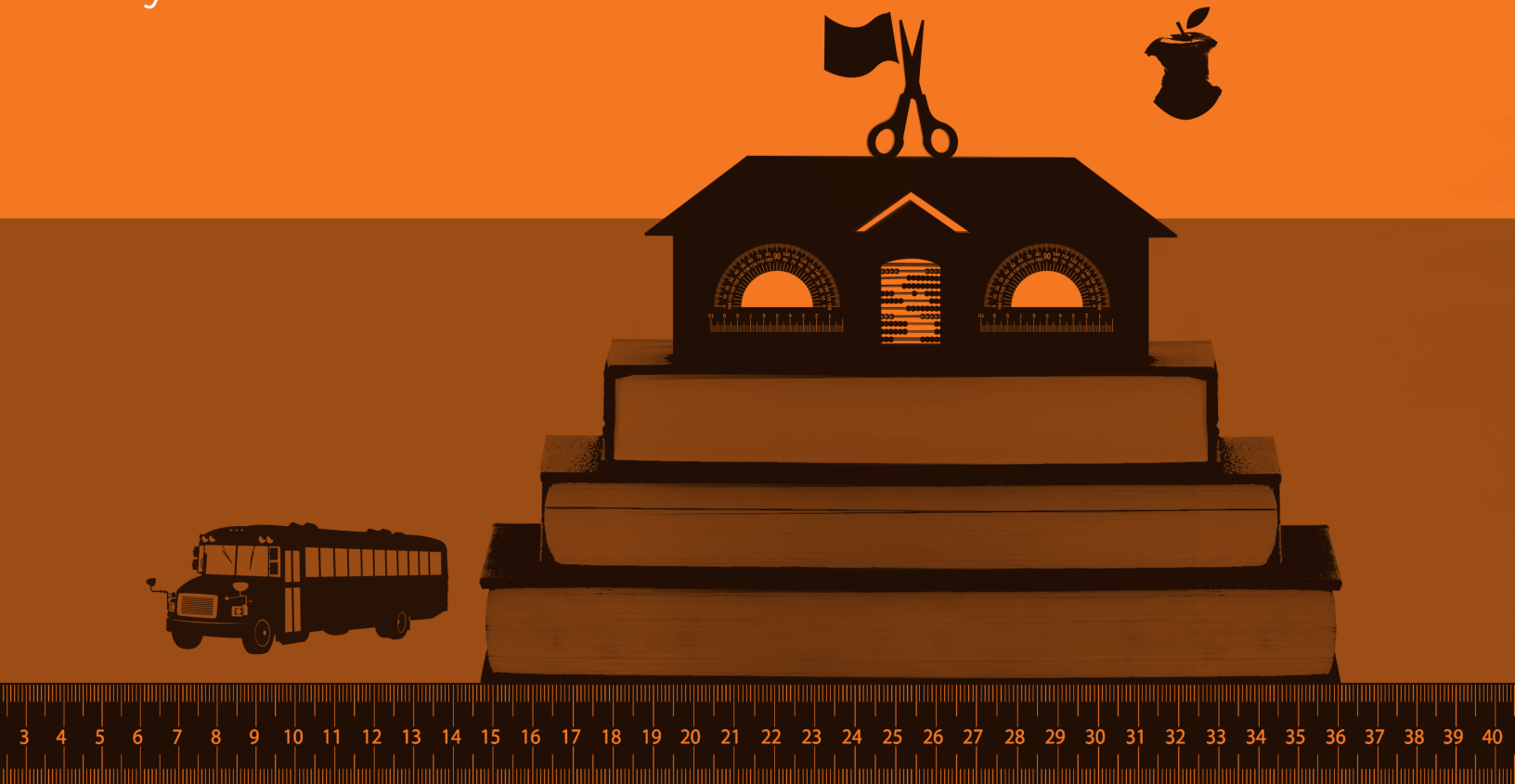
A **COUSINS RESEARCH GROUP** Report
on Public Education in Democracy

THE PUBLIC AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

by David Mathews



ABOUT THE **KETTERING FOUNDATION**

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others.

ABOUT THE **COUSINS RESEARCH GROUP**

The Cousins Research Group is one of the internal research divisions of the Kettering Foundation. Named for Norman Cousins, a leading American journalist and Kettering Foundation board member from 1967 to 1987, the group synthesizes different lines of study into books and articles and also proposes new lines of inquiry. The central focus for the group, as for the foundation, is on the role that citizens play in a democracy. Within the Cousins Research Group, there are a number of "departments." One group looks at the effect of federal policy on citizens, communities, and democracy itself, with an eye for implications on the relationship between citizens and government today. Another subset, the political anthropology and etymology group, examines the origins of human history for clues to how human beings collectively make decisions. A core group is also asked to prepare our research for publication. This group regularly writes for Kettering's periodicals, *Connections*, the *Kettering Review*, and the *Higher Education Exchange*, as well as for other publications.

This report includes two pieces that were published previously. "The Public for Public Schools Is Slipping" was first published in the April 9, 1995, issue of *Education Week*. An earlier version of the second piece, "Putting the Public Back into Public Education: An Old-Fashioned Remedy for a Troubled Relationship," was shared as a Cousins Research Group report to the joint staff and partners meeting of the Kettering Foundation in February 2015. It was later reprinted in the Summer 2015 issue of the *National Civic Review*. The piece builds on a previous article, also by David Mathews, "Rethinking Civic Engagement: The Case of the Public Schools and the Public," *National Civic Review* 103, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 4-10.

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Part I

“The Public for Public Schools Is Slipping” (1995)

IS AMERICA COMMITTED to its public schools? Of course it is. I've always believed that and thought that everybody else did too. If you ask Americans about their support, people usually say, yes, we need public schools.

Many Americans, however, are torn between a sense of duty to support a public school system and an obligation to do what's best for their own children. People believe that the schools are often too plagued by disorder and hamstrung by social problems to provide a good education. Changing the situation appears nearly impossible because Americans see the causes as deep cracks in the foundations of society—a breakdown of the family and the norms of responsible behavior. Faced with this dilemma, people opt to do what's best for their children. And what they see as best can drive them away from public schools, in spirit if not in fact.

The historic tie between the public and its schools seems to be weakening. Many people have decided that public schools aren't best for their nor anyone else's children. They would like to stand by these institutions but no longer believe they can.

THESE AMERICANS ARE THE MOST PECULIAR PEOPLE IN THE WORLD. YOU'LL NOT BELIEVE IT WHEN I TELL YOU HOW THEY BEHAVE. IN A LOCAL COMMUNITY IN THEIR COUNTRY, A CITIZEN MAY CONCEIVE OF SOME NEED WHICH IS NOT BEING MET. WHAT DOES HE DO? HE GOES ACROSS THE STREET AND DISCUSSES IT WITH HIS NEIGHBOR.

THE HEALTH OF A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY MAY BE MEASURED BY THE QUALITY OF FUNCTIONS PERFORMED BY PRIVATE CITIZENS.

—ATTRIBUTED TO ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE
***DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA*, 1835**

What can be done to reconnect the public to its schools? As I see it, it's not just that the schools need to be improved. It's the relationship between the schools and the community that needs repair. We won't begin to get at what has gone wrong in that relationship until we think the unthinkable—that the public for public schools is slipping away.

What originally connected the public to the public schools? The relationship meant more than public financing and control by a board of citizens. Historically, public schools in America meant schools that were the public's—schools that were instruments of the people, chartered to do the important work of American society.

Public schools were as much a foundation for our democracy as the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. We created a system to promote individual freedom and relied on the schools for social cohesion. Yet stability was not our highest ambition; America was founded to write a new chapter in human history—to create a "new secular order," an ambition so important that it was stamped on the one-dollar bill. Public schools were agents of that ambition: they were to complete "the great work of the Revolution."

Because the schools served the largest public interest and because they helped create the kind of country and communities we wanted, everybody was obliged to support them. That was the basis for the relationship between the citizenry and the public schools, the logic of the contract with the public.

Throughout our history, schools have been instruments for our country's objectives—from ensuring equity to defending the nation against the technological rival we once saw in the Soviet Union. Early schools were also public in that the citizenry was directly involved in their operation. Citizens built the schools and controlled them through local trustees. The community wasn't just "involved" in the schools; the two were inseparable. Different Americans had different reasons for subscribing to public schools; nonetheless, by the 19th century all parties had come to much the same conclusions—that public schools were an essential public good and that they were to be public in character; that is, to mirror the highest ideals of a democratic public—to provide an opportunity for everyone to reach his or her fullest potential.

Because the schools served the largest public interest and because they helped create the kind of country and communities we wanted, everybody was obliged to support them. That was the basis for the relationship between the citizenry and the public schools, the logic of the contract with the public.

What happened to this history? While Americans didn't change the mandate for the public schools immediately, they subcontracted much of the operational responsibility to a new group of professionals. The public, as a real force in the life of a school, was eventually rooted out, first with the good intention of getting "politics" out of education. As the 19th century gave way to the 20th, administrators, who made little distinction between politicians and the public, took direct aim at the democratic control of the schools. They argued that the schools really did not belong to the public, but to the school administration.

While administrators did not succeed in gaining total control (far from it), disenfranchising the public opened up a division between citizens and their schools. Inherently political issues in the educational debate became masked as scientific or technical considerations that were not the province of citizens. Other forces contributed to widening the distance between the public and its schools, which can be measured today in the way Americans react to school reforms.

Despite considerable effort, a good many reforms are failing now, "divided within, besieged without," according to a 1993 study by Public Agenda. Reporters such as Katherine Boo have found that reformers aren't inclined to include the public (not even parents). While they pay "lip service" to the notion of involvement, reformers work "doggedly to keep the masses from messing with their plans." The consequence is that special interests substitute for the public-at-large.

Any lack of confidence reformers have in the public is reciprocated. The reform debate strikes the public as incoherent and irrelevant. Many Americans feel that the leaders don't really understand their concerns. People are saying, in effect, "We are over here with our problems, and reformers are over there with their plans." Citizens are frustrated by a lack of handles to take hold of the problems that concern them. They say things like, "I wouldn't know how to be involved, I really wouldn't."

Finally, and most serious of all, the public may be unwilling to be involved in reforms because many people don't believe the schools are really theirs. When asked who "owned" the local schools, a New Jersey man said he was certain that they didn't belong to the people; they were, he said with conviction, "not our schools."

Although Americans worry about a country without public schools, the question remains: can we have schools open and common to all and, at the same time, get what is best for our children? Decisions of a century ago don't hold now. What the citizenry will eventually decide is impossible to predict. Nonetheless, as push comes to shove, many say they would forgo the unique benefits of a public school system to get a good education for their children.

The relationship between the public and its schools may have weakened to the point that we cannot start with reforms. One alternative suggested by our history is that reconnecting the public and the schools might come from retracing our steps. That would mean starting with the public rather than the schools.

Better public relations and techniques to "involve the community" don't get at the roots of the problem. Publics are formed around answers to a prior question: what kind of community do we want to be? We have to start with that question because the conversations that follow inevitably lead to discussions of education.

Education, which is more than schooling, is a necessary means to accomplishing public ends. A new mandate for a community and all education could be the basis for a new contract between the public and its schools.

All public schools may have to be rechartered—recommissioned by the public to do the public's work.

Part II

"Putting the Public Back into Public Education: An Old-Fashioned Remedy for a Troubled Relationship" (2015)

BEFORE I WROTE THIS PIECE, I was asked why the Kettering Foundation has paid so much attention to public education. The answer has to do with the way Kettering understands what it takes to make democracy work as it should. The foundation sees democracy as more than representative government created by contested elections. Democracy is certainly that, but it is more, as the word itself shows. Democracy is a political system in which the people, the *demos*, have the power, *cracy* (from *kratos*), to shape their lives and their future. The education of the next generation is an obvious way of shaping the future. So democracy compelled us to look at education and at the influence that people have on it. When we did, we were alarmed by what we found.

Writing this piece prompted me to say more than I have before about exactly what needs to happen *outside* the schools and in the communities where schools are located, particularly how to get started. I've come to see the need for a major change, not through school reform, but in the way schools and the citizenry in communities relate to one another. I am afraid that we have paid so much attention to various reforms that we've lost sight of what is happening to the relationship itself. (What I just said about school reforms is not to imply that they are unnecessary.) But the relationship is seriously troubled; so much so that I am tempted to say it's dysfunctional. And the poor relationship is an obstacle to doing the work necessary to give young people the education they deserve.

FROM A DEMOCRATIC PERSPECTIVE, THE QUESTION ISN'T WHETHER THERE SHOULD BE HIGHER STANDARDS OR A COMMON CORE CURRICULUM; IT IS *WHO* GETS TO SAY WHAT THE STANDARDS AND CURRICULUM SHOULD BE.

Americans want schools that are excellent and accessible to everyone. Yet when people look at the kind of education our children are getting, they aren't always happy with what they see in the nation's school system. Confidence in the nation's school system has been falling for some time, although people have more confidence in

their local schools. This may be similar to polls that once showed people had more confidence in their local representative than in Congress as a whole. Now, local representatives aren't seen in a positive light either.

The problem isn't just a loss of confidence; it is a loss of contact. People don't believe they can make a significant difference in what happens in the schools. Baking cookies to raise money for classroom projects isn't enough. While people don't expect or want complete control, the lack of meaningful influence angers them.

From a democratic perspective, the question isn't whether there should be higher standards or a common core curriculum; it is *who* gets to say what the standards and curriculum should be.

That's where a meaningful public voice seems to be missing, whether it is at the local, state, or federal level. And being kept on the sidelines may be one of the reasons a lot of Americans have lost confidence in our system of schooling.

A PARADOX

Schools have responded to the public's disquiet with all kinds of engagement and accountability efforts. Yet the lack of confidence not only persists; it may be getting even worse. A 2014 report by the Kettering Foundation and the Farkas Duffett Research Group, *Maze of Mistrust*, shows that school officials are often as frustrated with citizens as citizens are with them, albeit for different reasons. As one school board member complained:

> The less we hear from the public the better our relationship with our community is. There's very low turnout to our meetings, unless there is a unique situation, like when we had to rezone students to a newly built high school. There was squawking then. Otherwise, there's very low turnout and not too much competition in school board elections. A quiet public is a happy public. We can leave the work to the educators (Farkas and Duffett 2014, 8).

Why such cynicism about the relationship? What's going wrong?

Two Kinds of Accountability

There may be different reasons for this paradox. One is that the way school officials see citizens and the way citizens see themselves are quite different. They aren't on the same page; worse, they aren't always aware of the page the other is on. This is reflected in issues like accountability. People's view of what being accountable means isn't the same as what professional educators consider proof of accountability. These differences are one of the reasons I've come to believe that schools' efforts at engaging the public could be contributing to the loss of public support.

There are also other contributing factors. Everyone agrees that schools should be accountable for what they do. As Albert Dzur, the author of *Democratic Professionalism* told me, "There's real value to accountability—meaning, roughly, that our schools, courts, hospitals, etc., are doing what they say they are doing *and what the public has decided they should do* [emphasis added]." However, Dzur fears the part about the public deciding is being lost. In fact, he sees signs that institutions are moving farther away from the public by developing even more expert and technical processes in hopes of restoring lost legitimacy or creating better defenses. He calls this movement "super professionalism." Although done in the name of restoring public confidence, some accountability projects are, indeed, protective measures intended to shield institutions from what their officials consider unwarranted criticisms and intrusions into their work. That's an understandable reaction, although not one likely to restore public confidence.

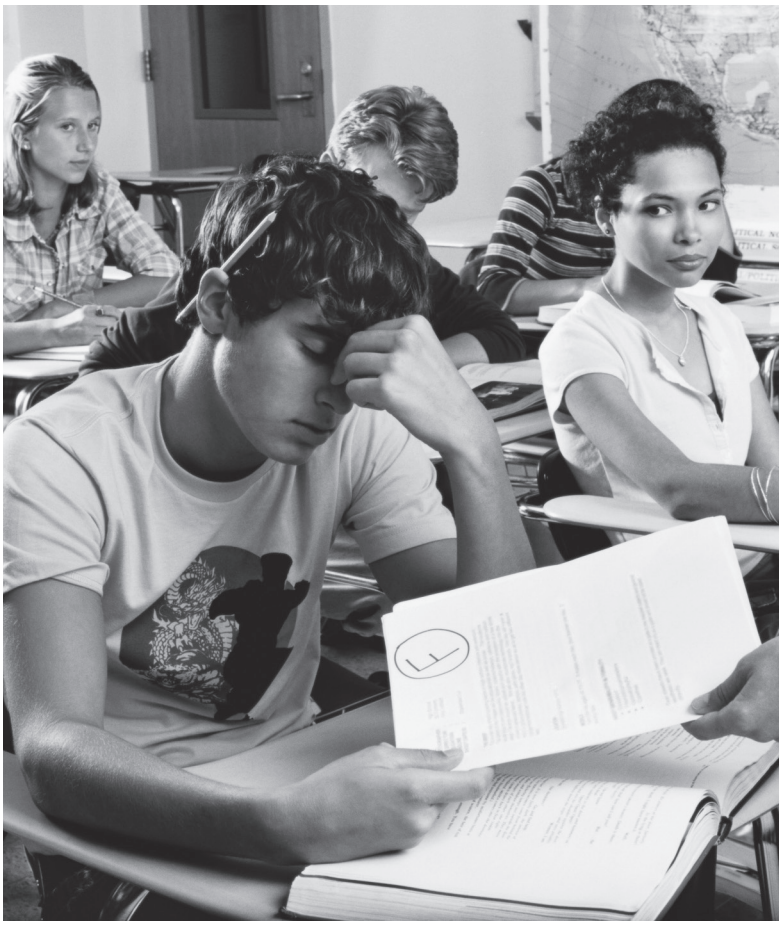
Another scholar, Brian Cook, writes in *Bureaucracy and Self-Government*, "An increasingly vicious circle has emerged in which anxiety about control and accountability . . . has led to more extensive, more complex controls, which in turn have increased the bureaucratic distance between administrators and the public they are expected to serve. This distance then raises new worries about control and accountability and brings about the introduction of another layer of controls" (Cook 1996, 134-135).

IT APPEARS THAT *ACCOUNTABILITY* IS LARGELY AN INSTITUTIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL TERM. PEOPLE PREFER TO TALK ABOUT *RESPONSIBILITY*.

Americans have strong feelings, not so much about accountability, but about a lack of it. It appears that *accountability* is largely an institutional and professional term. People prefer to talk about *responsibility*. Accountability is said to be what remains when responsibility has been taken out. To reemphasize what I reported before, while accountability is typically a matter of information for institutional leaders, for citizens it is very much a matter of relationships. People look for a frank, open, morally grounded exchange with officials. And they want the kind of relationships that provide opportunities for meaningful influence. That is what they see as school officials being responsible.

These officials believe they are being accountable by publishing voluminous data on academic performance. They believe these performance measures are in line with the public's demand for higher standards. Citizens want to be informed yet may feel overwhelmed by what they consider meaningless numbers. Skeptical of metrics, they may feel that they are being manipulated by the way statistics are used. For instance, although most people want students held to high expectations, they think that test scores are only one indication of a student's or a school's performance.

Some citizens believe that who should be responsible or accountable—and for what—needs to be determined by the public. And some of them have decided that they, their families, and their communities are ultimately responsible for what happens to the next generation. Yet, when accountability is institutionally defined, it tends to disenfranchise citizens. If people don't have responsibility, they are reduced to consumers, and all accountability falls on the schools.



School Isolation

Another factor in the continuing decline in confidence has to do with forces that have isolated the schools from the communities and from the larger realm of education of which they are a part. Today, schools may appear to be communities unto themselves. Their focus is inward on their operations more than it is outward on the community.

This isolation robs the schools of the educational resources that communities have to offer. That is, the isolation deprives the schools of the "complementary production" of learning that communities can provide, which is essential if schools are to do the things they can't do alone.

Complementary production is Kettering's version of a similar term Elinor Ostrom used in her Nobel Prize-winning research on the importance of the "coproduction" done by citizens. In "Covenanting, Co-Producing, and the Good Society," she explains: "Those of us who teach should understand that it is not a one-way process. Teachers do not produce education by themselves. It is teachers, students, students' families, and students' peers that co-produce education" (Ostrom 1993, 8). Coproduction or complementary production is the mark of a constructive relationship.

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In an article for the Summer 2014 issue of the *National Civic Review*, I gave numerous examples of community resources that can be used to educate—for instance, a farm for retired racehorses in Kentucky that an alternative school used to awaken students to the importance of history and the marvels of biology. And I cited research showing that even poor communities where residents had little formal schooling nonetheless had people who can contribute to the education of young people. One of the best stories is the one about Wiley's barber.

A businessman, Wiley Mullins, explains how his own love of learning began when he was sitting in the barber's chair in his hometown, a rather unlikely site for education. The barber told parents that if they brought their youngsters in on Saturdays, he would cut their hair for a dollar. When the children walked into the barbershop, there were six boxes of books lined up along the wall, each marked with a number, 1 through 6. As they sat down to get their hair cut, the barber would ask, "What grade are you in?" If the youngster said, "the first grade," the barber would say, "I want you to go over and get a book out of box 1; and while I cut your hair, read it to me." That was repeated for the other five grades. Here was a barber encouraging reading, and his barbershop was an educational resource.

Pat Harbour calls citizens like Wiley's barber "community educators," even though none are teachers (many such stories are included in Pat's book of the same title).

The conclusion of Wiley's story is even more remarkable. Years later, he returned home and ran into the wife of the barber, now a widow. He told her how important his experience in the barbershop had been for him and other kids in the community. She said, "Yes. My husband loved to hear children read, because, you know, he couldn't read himself." Communities are full of educating resources like this one—even in the mostly unlikely of places. By not recognizing and using these resources, schools miss out on an opportunity to do their jobs more effectively.

RATHER THAN IMPROVING THE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND THE SCHOOLS, REFORMS HAVE OFTEN BEEN POLARIZING.

A MATTER OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Given the difference between how citizens see education, as compared with school officials, and cases where the schools seemed isolated from their communities, the foundation began to look at what is going on in the relationship between the public and the public schools. We were struck by how little the relationship has changed over the years. Rather than improving the interaction between the public and the schools, reforms have often been polarizing. Reforms to improve reading skills, for instance, led to what have been called the "reading wars." One group of reformers has insisted that sounding out words, phonics, is the only way children learn to read. Another group has been equally insistent that children learn to read by focusing on the meaning of words, which they call "whole language," and they advocate teaching reading, writing, and other studies together. These wars use high explosives with charges like "child abuse" being hurled at opposing camps. And the tone is so strident that a compromise movement for a balanced approach has only stirred more controversy. As reported in the *Harvard Education Letter*, the argument has become not only polarized but also politicized. That is, the wars have moved outside the educational arena and into the public sphere. This dispute is only one of many, as in current divisions over charter schools and the Common Core standards.

It seems that the reformers think that improving education is like coming up with the right answer to a test question. But relationships are another matter; they don't have right answers. They are dynamic, changing constantly as circumstances change. Also, most of the reforms have come from professionals or political leaders. While the reforms themselves may have merit, the character of the relationship remains troubling. And it hasn't improved with time.

The titles of some of Kettering's studies are illustrative. A 1993 report described the schools as "divided within, besieged without." More than 20 years later, researchers found a "maze of mistrust," which is reflected in this comment on the relationship:

> The threat of litigation hangs over so much of what we do. People don't want to talk without their lawyers present. It's much harder to negotiate, everything has to be cleared—will this be something they can sue us over? Is this going to hold up in court? It's hard to be a leader when you are constantly looking over your shoulder (Farkas and Duffett 2014, 6-7).

Certainly there are many places where the people in the community have a good personal relationship with the people in the schools, and the people in the schools have a good personal relationship with the people in the community. But that's not what I am talking about when I question whether the way of relating between the school—as an institution—and the community—as a diverse body of public citizens—has become dysfunctional. A relationship becomes dysfunctional when the way two parties go about dealing with one another doesn't work well for either. Their interactions are burdened by misperception, distrust, and misunderstanding. Communications are blocked by negative feelings and a history of grievances, whether real or imagined.

Was the relationship between the public and the public schools ever completely harmonious? I doubt it. The education of the young is too important to too many people for too many reasons not to be the subject of ongoing disagreements. A functional relationship is not conflict free; still, when it is constructive, the parties have found ways to manage their disagreements. They aren't locked into habits of mutual recriminations and blame.

Changing Relationships

Relationships have to be constantly renegotiated and reshaped. They become dysfunctional when there aren't opportunities for change to occur. If that is true in the case of our schools, then the question isn't just what's happened to the schools' relationship to the public, but what's happened to the space needed for the reshaping to occur?

Could that "space" be in school board meetings? After all, boards both employ school officials and represent citizens. Their meetings, however, are often the sites of confrontations. And boards may be seen as representing the school to the community more than the community to the school. In fact, there may not be any one place where the renegotiations should occur any more than there is any one reform or solution that will satisfy everyone for all time. And that may be as it should be.

THE QUESTION ISN'T JUST WHAT'S HAPPENED TO THE SCHOOLS' RELATIONSHIP TO THE PUBLIC, BUT WHAT'S HAPPENED TO THE SPACE NEEDED FOR THE RESHAPING TO OCCUR?

Actually, there are many relatively neutral places in a community where a more constructive relationship might develop. (I say "relatively" because there aren't any spaces that are completely unaffected by opinions over what happens in schooling.) Libraries, civic organizations, study clubs, religious institutions, economic development organizations—even people's homes—are places to start. In fact, it might be best if many groups were involved in opening up space for reshaping the relationship—on an ongoing basis.

Going to Work

What should happen when educators and citizens meet to reshape the way they relate? While letting off some steam may be inevitable, people sitting around and complaining about the relationship isn't likely to be effective. Neither is just being nice and civil. Identifying some shared problems and moving on to work on them together may be more productive. To paraphrase Nelson Mandela, if you start working with people you see as your enemies, it makes them your partners.

What are some problems that citizens and professional educators might work on together? Any problem that troubles both school and community will do: youth violence, bullying, school dropouts, the lack of jobs for young people, young workers who lack the skills they need for the jobs they have. The list could go on.

Working together, however, is not as simple as it might appear. The key is not so much what the problem to be solved is but how the work of citizens relates to the work of schools. I would say again that there are significant differences between the two. If these aren't understood, trying to work together will be just another source of frustration. Because this is such a critical distinction, I want to say more about what exactly these differences are.

The differences begin with deciding what to call the problems, or what Kettering refers to as "naming" problems. School professionals tend to use expert terminology with statistical descriptions. People tend to talk about problems in terms of their personal experiences and the things they care about deeply—being secure, being free, being treated fairly. If the descriptions of problems that school professionals use don't include what citizens hold dear, people aren't likely to become truly engaged.

Who is needed to combat the problems once they have been named? Once again, school professionals naturally tend to do what they have been trained to do. They see the school as the primary actor, with citizens as supporting players. Yet if citizens don't have a meaningful role to play, the relationship can't change. Citizens themselves and their organizations have to be actors who bring educational resources in the community to complement what the schools do.

Who gets to decide what is to be done in the shared work, and how is the decision to be made? Professionals, by and large, are trained to decide based on hard evidence. That's fine for them, yet it isn't the way citizens decide. When people exercise sound judgment, they don't ignore facts, but they decide by weighing what is most valuable to them against various options for acting. And since people consider many things valuable, there are inevitable tensions over what is the most important. For instance, what will make us secure may well restrict our freedom. These tensions have to be recognized and worked through. There are always difficult trade-offs to make. This way of deciding is called deliberation. People don't have to totally agree when they deliberate, but if they don't face up to the tensions and decide on what trade-offs they will and won't make, their decisions won't hold when there is hard work to be done.

CITIZENS THEMSELVES AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONS HAVE TO BE ACTORS WHO BRING EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES IN THE COMMUNITY TO COMPLEMENT WHAT THE SCHOOLS DO.

If school professionals don't encourage and listen to public deliberations in the work they do with citizens, they won't hear anything more than hasty reactions and first opinions, not shared and reflective judgment.

Action on any problem requires resources. However, the resources schools have and those citizens have in their communities aren't the same. School resources are largely financial and professional. Community resources vary widely, from horse farms to barber chairs. And these community resources are so unlike the ones schools use, they often go unrecognized and untapped by both professionals and citizens.

Recognizing the educational potential in horse farms and barbershops requires imagination. And it will only occur if citizens and school officials shift their attention from schooling to education more broadly understood. Our history shows that Americans have always educated through a variety of institutions, formal and informal. These have ranged from yesterday's patriotic festivals to today's television programs. We need to revisit that history and take into consideration all the educating institutions that can be useful actors in the shared work of combating the problems that plague communities and schools alike.

The differences that can derail shared work continue: Institutions like schools plan and organize what they do in a fashion quite unlike the way citizens act. Institutions usually focus on one initiative; citizens will launch several. One group may want to start an afterschool-mentoring program. Another may want to provide adult volunteers to walk kids through neighborhoods as they go to and from school. And there is no central bureaucracy to direct what an independent citizenry will do. Still, civic projects have to support and reinforce one another to be effective. That is accomplished by having related objectives and a shared sense of direction, which can emerge from deliberations.

Because of these differences, trying to involve citizens in institutional routines like planning and budgeting, while popular, can be counterproductive. A citizenry has a self-organizing ability and seldom makes the kind of plans or budget decisions that institutions do. It might be better to let institutions do what they do best, and for professionals to align their practices with the way citizens work, rather than the other way around.

When a project has ended, institutions evaluate the results against a fixed set of objectives, often using quantitative means. Citizens, at their best, learn together from what they have done together. Communities judge themselves as much as the results. And the objectives are reevaluated, "Is what we thought we wanted really what we needed?" Even though a bit of an overgeneralization, it might be said that communities learn and institutions evaluate Institutions also fear failure and for good reason: they can get burned in the news media.

Communities that continue to learn can fail successfully; that is, they can use disappointing results to figure out what to do better. In shared work, schools, which tend to be heavily structured, might benefit from being part of collaborative efforts with citizens where there is the freedom to experiment and failure does not have to be fatal.

MORE WORK FOR EDUCATORS?

What does it mean for professionals in schools to align their work more closely with the work of citizens? The people who serve in schools already have too much to do, and I am not proposing to add to their duties. They don't need to become community organizers. They just need to understand what citizens do and try to accommodate it in their work. The best example I can think of is what I suggested about accountability. Why not take some of the time devoted to presenting data and doing public relations and use it for public relating, for building relationships? I suspect that is already occurring, though it may not be recognized as a different way to go about a well-established routine.

Educators only need to do what they do ordinarily, just a bit differently. Including the names people give problems, which reflect what they hold dear, doesn't mean eliminating expert analysis. Considering what citizens can do in identifying options for action shouldn't be difficult. Paying attention to the outcomes of public deliberations rather than just relying on polls and focus groups could be done without serious difficulty. Recognizing the educational potential in community resources and making use of them in the schools is admittedly a challenge, though not an impossibility. The payoff is getting reinforcement from the educating in communities that goes on outside schools. Learning with a community could even be liberating.

RECOGNIZING THE EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL IN COMMUNITY RESOURCES AND MAKING USE OF THEM IN THE SCHOOLS IS ADMITTEDLY A CHALLENGE, THOUGH NOT AN IMPOSSIBILITY.

Continual Improvement, Not Another Reform

I want to emphasize that what I am suggesting is not another reform proposal. I would say again, unlike past reforms, much of what I am proposing needs to come from the community side of the relationship. Professional educators have been reformed enough. In fact, what I have in mind is just the opposite of a prescription for another reform. It is making continuous improvements in the education of young people. Genuine change comes slowly, and by trial and error. I am not advocating another new program to adopt with a set of instructions to follow.

I am suggesting a different approach: rebuilding relationships by working and learning together.

There are sound historical precedents for citizens joining forces to bring about change. Think about the colonial town meetings and Alexis de Tocqueville's account of Americans going across the street to talk to their neighbors when confronted with a problem rather than going to the authorities, as Europeans did. Look at the research on how communities like Tupelo, Mississippi, moved from being "the poorest town in the state" to a modern model for economic progress by starting with small groups taking responsibility for improving the places where they lived, year by year. Read the story about Cincinnati, Ohio, where a Neighbor to Neighbor coalition emerged to counter racial strife. Does this history prove that working together will always triumph? Certainly not. Do these stories suggest that starting with shared work is a possibility for changing a relationship? I think so.

I don't intend to ignore the difficulties in realigning the school's work with the community's work. There have been hybrid organizations of citizens and professionals in fields like health care that have not worked well. Professionals may use their expertise to dominate the meetings. Citizens may try to avoid facing up to painful trade-offs. Efforts at partnerships can end in disappointment.

Despite these problems, however, there are many cases where schools and citizen groups have complemented one another and fashioned a constructive relationship in the process.

One example is in Alabama, where a cooperative association of rural schools called PACERS has used community resources—from solar homes and fishponds to local newsrooms—to provide learning opportunities that enhance school instruction. St Louis Park, Minnesota, and Albion, Michigan, are also great examples. In both cases, people and organizations from across the community worked together to make the education of children a priority. I hasten to add, however, that the relationship reshaping described in this piece doesn't have to be highly organized. Informal is fine. Living rooms and kitchen tables have been wellsprings for all kinds of civic initiatives.

Invigorating a Culture of Learning

There can be a side effect to working together in the way I'm proposing that goes beyond the benefits of the work done (the problems solved) and beyond improved relationships. It is strengthening the culture of learning in a community.

WHAT EDUCATOR WOULDN'T WANT TO BE IN A PLACE WHERE EVERYONE IS TRYING TO TEACH THE KIDS?

Every community has norms that influence the way people behave. Some of those have to do with the importance placed on learning. In one community that had worked on using its educational resources to reinforce the schools and other educational institutions, researchers asked citizens what effect their efforts had had. People didn't just respond with accounts of specific projects, they said that the most important outcome was that everybody felt obligated to do what they could to teach the kids. That's what I mean by strengthening a culture of learning.

All the work of citizens that I've described is a form of learning. Finding out what people hold dear and incorporating that when naming problems is learning. Identifying tensions within and among options for actions is also a type of learning. Exercising the human faculty for judgment in deliberative decision making is learning. (In fact, deliberation has been described as a way people "teach themselves" before they act.) Locating all the potential resources for educating in a community is another form of learning. Finding ways to collaborate, to reinforce one another's efforts, is learning. And evaluating, judging the value of what has been accomplished, is quintessentially learning.

Working together in this way is inherently learning together. And this work enriches the community's culture that sets the expectations for learning. That is the beneficial side effect I am referring to. Collaborative problem solving can't help but reinforce what the schools are trying to do. What educator wouldn't want to be in a place where everyone is trying to teach the kids?

SOMETHING ANYONE, ANYWHERE CAN DO

What I am suggesting isn't a cure-all. I'm focusing on relationships because I am afraid that they have gotten lost in searching for the perfect reform. In saying this, I don't mean that all the reforms have been bad news. They haven't. I am also saying that there are everyday opportunities available to everyone in every community to begin improvements. No permission, extra funding, or special skill is required to get started. People are meeting and talking everywhere and much of it is about the next generation and its education. Some of that talk and some of those meetings could be used to fuel the shared work of combating problems that plague our young people and our communities. And that work could change the way citizens and schools relate to one another for the better.

Change doesn't need to get up to scale; big meetings may not be as effective as small ones that are connected. Who can do the connecting? Maybe municipal officials. Maybe NGOs. Maybe just people using social media with a variation of crowd sourcing. The idea is to build networks, not centralized organizations.

Is everything just a matter of relationships? Not at all. Is just concentrating on relationships assuming that funding, bureaucratic restrictions, and equity don't matter? Of course not. Still, our history shows that starting with the work people can do with one another and with the schools is a sound way to begin changes. It is a way to generate some of the power communities worry they have lost, a way to create the public voice we fear has become silent, a way to give all of our young people a key to the future they deserve.

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