

Reclaiming Public Education

Common Sense Approaches



Bob Cornett

Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is an operating foundation rooted in the tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is: what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but that engages in joint research with others.

The interpretations and conclusions contained in this publication, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author and not necessarily those of the Kettering Foundation, its directors, or its officers.

Program Officers: Randall Nielsen, Connie Crockett

Managing Editor: Joey Easton

Copy Editors: Laura Carlson, Jared Namenson

Design and Production: Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

Copyright© 2015 by the Kettering Foundation

ISBN: 978-0-923993-61-0

FOREWORD

BOB CORNETT CALLS HIMSELF A “RETIRED BUREAUCRAT.” Named the state budget director for Kentucky at age 30, he was also the Kentucky representative to the Appalachian Regional Commission, and had an illustrious career with the Council of State Governments. Bob, his late wife Jean, and their extended family are renowned among musicians for creating the Festival of the Bluegrass in Lexington, Kentucky—where that distinctive form of music began. Bob has written of the opportunities such festivals can provide by making use of traditional music in the education of young people. Bob is also an avid reader, a keen observer, and a prodigious connector.

The Kettering Foundation came to know Bob when he enthusiastically responded to the foundation’s report *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy*. He has brought to the foundation a wonderful assortment of people who have told us about their practical use of the insights in the book and the opportunities and alliances they’ve discovered.

These new friends see educating as community work. They have discovered that their ability to educate young people extends beyond the institution of school and into the problems and resources of the greater community. For Kettering, knowing Bob has provided many beneficial learning exchanges.

Bob is also a beautiful writer. His stories of “community educators” always begin with people seeing and building on what is already happening in the life of their community. We’ve asked Bob to share more about that in *Reclaiming Public Education: Common Sense Approaches*.

Connie Crockett

Program Officer, Kettering Foundation



BLUEGRASS AND CHESTNUTS

HAVE BEEN DEEPLY INVOLVED FOR ABOUT 20 YEARS WITH WHAT CAN BE LOOSELY CALLED “EDUCATION REFORM.” When I started, I was a typical daddy and granddaddy who wanted little more than to make a citizen’s contribution to better schools. Now I realize that public education is part of a broader set of forces that are changing our society in fundamental ways, and I feel obligated to do what I can to understand those forces.

I need to write the story of my journey from where I was to where I am, partly because the process of writing helps me clarify my thinking, and partly because I believe it might be of some help to other people, especially to my fellow elders.

The person who played the most important role in getting me involved in education reform was Faye King, who was principal of a Kentucky mountain elementary school (Stanton Elementary) for 28 years. Faye had long been convinced that children learn best by active participation in things that matter in their communities. One of the ways that Faye connected her students with the community was through a bluegrass music club, the “Wise Village Pickers.” Some 50 or 60 youngsters, from kindergarten through fifth grade, came together and learned to pick and sing from adult volunteers in the community. That group of children became well known in bluegrass music circles; the Wise Village Pickers, among other things, performed before a large audience at an annual convention of the International Bluegrass Music Association. The audience expected to applaud politely for some kids, but they soon realized that those weren’t kids—they were musicians—and the applause just about blew the roof off the building.

50 or 60 youngsters, from kindergarten through fifth grade, came together and learned to pick and sing from adult volunteers in the community. That group of children, the Wise Village Pickers, became well known in bluegrass music circles.

My family has put on “The Festival of the Bluegrass” for over 40 years in Lexington, Kentucky. The Wise Village Pickers became part of the festival. They helped start a music camp at the festival for youngsters ages 6 to 18. It is a treat to see those 60 or so camp kids open the festival on Thursday night, showing what they have learned over the previous days to an appreciative audience. But the biggest treat for me is what the camp has inspired; lots of those kids, some of them grown up now, share their joy and their skills year round with the people in their home communities. Our rural musical legacy can be a powerful tool for strengthening communities.

By the time Faye King retired, I was convinced that her basic premise was correct: young people learn much better when they are active participants in things that matter in their communities. Pursuant to that premise, Faye and I became acquainted with the deeply dedicated principal of Kingdom Come, a tiny K-5 public elementary school with fewer than 100 students in the village of Linefork in Letcher County. This is deep in the heart of Appalachian coal-mining country, near the border with southwestern Virginia. The principal, Betty Caudill, took the initiative in connecting her school with an Appalachia-wide project, led by foresters and others associated with the American Chestnut Foundation, to restore the American chestnut tree to the forests. This tree had been essentially destroyed by blight; almost all the chestnut trees in Kentucky were dead by 1950. But the tree was very much alive in the memories of the elderly residents of the area, who recalled chestnut blossoms making the mountains appear snowcapped in the springtime.

The school and the fire department joined together to put on a festival to celebrate the return of the chestnut.

The Kingdom Come students set out to preserve those memories. For one important project, the students joined with the local volunteer fire department to videotape interviews with elderly people who remembered the chestnut; those videos are now a treasured part of the Linefork community's archives. In addition to the videotapes, the school and the fire department joined together to put on a festival to celebrate the return of the chestnut.

Some background might be useful to readers unfamiliar with Eastern Kentucky. Linefork's Kingdom Come Settlement School started as one of the mountain "settlement schools" that were common in Kentucky, beginning about a century ago. Linefork is at the base of Pine Mountain; the Harlan County town of Cumberland is on the other side of Pine Mountain, and the Virginia town of Appalachia is a few miles from Cumberland. The settlement school facility was taken over by the county school system about a half-century ago.

The school's enrollment, which gradually declined over the years, reached fewer than a hundred K-5 students and the school was closed in 2007. The building and grounds have come under the control of the community; the official name is the Linefork-Kingdom Come Community Center. Linefork is a vivid example of a self-governing learning culture at work in its efforts to help restore the American chestnut tree to the forest.

Not long ago, I tagged along on a hike through the forest, looking for some of the sprouts that still come up from the roots of long-dead chestnut trees. The hikers consisted mostly of members of the "Taproot Corps." The word *taproot* refers

to the main source of strength for trees, and also to the active citizenry that is the main source of a community's strength. The Taproot Corps is intergenerational, with the young people being at least as important as the elders. The community people were joined by a retired Forest Service professional, Rex Mann, who has long been a prominent volunteer in the restoration initiative of the American Chestnut Foundation.

The local hikers knew the general area where some chestnut roots and sprouts were located, but nobody knew exactly where to find them; so we just walked and looked, with Rex Mann showing us interesting things about the forest. He pointed out where lightning had started a fire that, in turn, had opened the way for new growth. Rex urged us to be on the lookout for elk droppings—the elk would be attracted to the new growth; and, sure enough, we saw plenty of signs that elk were around.

Spring growth had not yet started and, as Rex showed us, leaves on chestnut sprouts tend to hang on longer than leaves on other trees. Our task was to look for leaves that might be chestnut, then to inspect the leaves more closely to determine whether they were chestnut or something else. If the leaves were chestnut we needed to judge whether the sprout was suitable for replanting, and whether it could be detached from the root that was nourishing it. After lots of walking and climbing (and marveling at the beauty of those mountains), we ended up with eight sprouts, ranging from about two to about five feet in length. We carried the sprouts to the school property, where we planted them in an area that offers adequate growing conditions.

One of the hikers, a young boy named Chris, volunteered to look after the sprouts, to keep them watered and otherwise give them a good chance to grow. He made friends with an 89-year-old man who grew up near the school and who remembers well the chestnut trees from their glory days. As a result of that friendship, Chris has acquired an invaluable source of knowledge to draw upon and something else: he knows that it is up to him and his generation to bring back the chestnut. What Chris is doing is significant, it matters to lots of people, and he knows that it matters.

There will not be chestnuts to harvest any time soon. Those trees that we planted will die from the blight, but if all goes well they will live long enough to blossom, and the blossoms will be pollinated by blight-resistant pollen supplied by the American Chestnut Foundation. The sprouts will develop roots and those roots, after the trees we planted are dead, will produce sprouts that can, in time, also be pollinated

The word *taproot* refers to the main source of strength for trees, and also to the active citizenry that is the main source of a community's strength.

and grow their own roots. The American chestnut is on its way back, and that is good. But what is even better is the strength that the chestnut project is adding to that community. Most of the people in Linefork know about the chestnut project. Many of them have visited the sprouts that Chris is looking after, and a display on the history of the chestnut and the outlook for the future has been created. Plans are being made, also, to update a history of the Kingdom Come School, and a music room has been created at the center, along with a room for quilters.



A SELF-GOVERNING CULTURE

A SELF-GOVERNING CULTURE IS AT WORK IN LETCHER COUNTY.

There are no bosses; the people are coalescing around mission, promise, and the pursuit of what matters to them. It is of particular significance that a number of public agencies are part of the team, but not the dominating part. The public agencies understand that this work is open to everybody; and, even though nobody has said so, I believe the public officials realize that, while they are welcome participants in the self-governing culture, they would be unwelcome if they undertook to put themselves in charge.

I'm confident that the Linefork community will continue to build upon what it has started. One especially important initiative is a medical clinic with an emphasis on wellness. To that end, a group started a community garden on the school grounds, and the garden will help make nutrition and exercise an integral part of the wellness program. The hard-driving bluegrass music is also to be part of good health; the music demands that the listeners get up and move. The music helps build a sense of community. I recently watched a four-year-old girl at a bluegrass jam session at the school; when the music got fast she stood up, and every muscle in her body kept time to the music. The people in the audience loved that little girl and she loved them. The child was learning a highly important lesson: that she matters, that she belongs. And the adults in the audience were being reminded that the children need the adults in the community, and that the adults need the children.

Linefork's self-governing culture need not be, and should not be, restricted to Linefork. Other mountain communities are already seeing what is happening in Linefork, and they want what a self-governing culture could bring to their communities. In time, and with the collaboration of organizations whose success depends upon strong communities, there could be many communities like Linefork; and I am certain that those communities will come together in mutually reinforcing networks.

The American Chestnut Foundation is an example of an organization that needs strong communities in order to succeed with its mission. And, surely, some of the more visionary of the health-related businesses will encourage the kinds of wellness programs that Linefork is creating. Chestnuts and health are just examples; there is

The child was learning a highly important lesson: that she matters, that she belongs. And the adults in the audience were being reminded that the children need the adults in the community, and that the adults need the children.

no limit to the good things that can be accomplished through self-governing cultures at the community level. I grew up in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky, and I believe that the self-reliant cultural legacy equips the Appalachian mountain people to help lead the way toward strong communities everywhere.

I feel good about what I see happening at Linefork. People still have the sharing instinct that brought humans to where we are. Faye King knew what she was doing when she reached for that sharing instinct. She, too, believed that instinct is especially strong in Appalachia. But community-based strength is not the whole story of what is happening around the education of children, not by a long shot.



THE CHALLENGE TO INSTITUTIONS

INSTITUTIONS, ESPECIALLY GOVERNMENT AGENCIES, ARE IN THE TOP-DOWN MANDATING BUSINESS—THEY SEND ORDERS DOWN THROUGH CHAINS OF COMMAND TO THE PEOPLE AT THE BOTTOM WHO DO THE WORK.

This is the nature of the beast, as I long ago learned from my own career in and around public agencies at local, state, and federal levels. It is also the case that lots of pretending goes on: the people in political bureaucratic hierarchies make believe that what is good for them is good for the public. The combination of these two characteristics of hierarchies—top-down control and pretending that top-down is good for everybody—is largely responsible, I am convinced, for the foolish things that are done in the name of education reform.

Federal and state bureaucracies will always insist upon holding educators “accountable”; and those bureaucratic assessments will always be biased in favor of the top-down stuff we are seeing now. Standardized testing, as a major case in point, helps give the hierarchies control over teachers and students; that is the basic purpose that is being served by the mandates. The notion that the testing produces learning is a contrived illusion that serves the control purpose of the hierarchies. And the testing procedures serve, also, to give politicians and bureaucrats something to make their promises seem plausible—such things as more “accountability” and reducing the “achievement gap” can sound good in a political setting.

Testing procedures serve to give politicians and bureaucrats something to make their promises seem plausible—such things as more “accountability” and reducing the “achievement gap” can sound good in a political setting.

I have 32 grandchildren (counting great-grandchildren), which gives me 32 very strong and personal reasons not to stand aside and accept whatever bureaucracies might send down from on high. Millions of other grandparents, because they think and feel the way grandparents do, share my reasons for caring about public education.

What we need to develop are effective community-based assessments. Communities can assess for themselves whether or not local education is effective by answering some questions: Are the children learning what we want them to learn? Are we as a community exemplifying good educational practices? This kind of assessment requires approaches that are entirely different from the top-down testing systems favored by bureaucracies.

I don't need to elaborate much about the limitations of bureaucracies; we know from our own observations and from common sense that bureaucracies often organize their work into compartments—sometimes described as “silos.” And we know that bureaucracies tend to write rules at the top and use coercive methods to see that the people at the bottom follow the rules. These bureaucratic tendencies, in the case of public education, result in narrow curricula that discourage the integration of knowledge. Knowledge that has no unifying context is of little or no lasting value to anybody, and coercion discourages the passion that is essential to effective learning.

Several years ago, my late friend and fellow bureaucrat, Roger Buchanan, and I, with coaching from some outstanding educators, came to see that what was being

“The schools used to be things we owned, but now they're just places we visit.”

touted as “school reform” had become biased in favor of bureaucratic interests. One wise mountain elder summed up the situation this way: “The schools used to be things we owned, but now they're just places we visit.”

We can see the effects of top-down compartmentalizing all around if we take the trouble to look. Public schools are an important example. Our best educators know that the standardized testing and other compartmentalizing mandates have the effect of subordinating student learning to adult status. Adults who run the education hierarchies get favorable attention when the test scores are good. And there's another damaging effect of compartmentalizing, one that is largely overlooked: learning is often perceived as something that takes place only in school. This perception, in turn, gives weight to the notion that adults who live in and care about the community have little or nothing to contribute to children's learning. It can, therefore, seem right and proper that the top-down hierarchies should control the education of children.

We know—at least those of us who have been looking around know—that the political/bureaucratic apparatus that has come to dominate public education will not reform itself; that's a fact of bureaucratic life. But a combination of citizens and educators can reform public education; and, as an even more basic benefit, the process of reforming education can contribute significantly to reclaiming our democracy.

My purpose here is to encourage the start of a movement, a movement that combines the common sense of citizens, the creative energies of young people, and the expertise of educators. The real task at hand, the task that can take us to sustained reform, is for everybody to realize that local citizens can do things that make a crucial difference. David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation, in his valuable book

Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy, uses the term *public work* to describe the kinds of projects that communities can undertake.



WOODEN SPOON COALITIONS

BELIEVE THAT THERE IS ONLY ONE SOURCE OF SUSTAINABLE STRENGTH THAT IS CAPABLE OF REFORMING EDUCATION, AND THAT IS PEOPLE WHO KNOW AND CARE ABOUT EACH OTHER. As the equivalent of barn raisings, corn shuckings, and hoedowns, or what my friend Roger called “wooden spoon coalitions,” we need more of the kind of people who come together to work on local issues. Wooden spoons can symbolize doing things locally: they come in handy for lots of chores, and if you need more spoons the community can create them—you don’t need far-away experts. But wooden spoon coalitions can symbolize something deeper than chores. When citizens share in doing things that are important to their communities, they amplify democracy’s basic message—citizens matter.

That message, when it is understood, tells the political bureaucratic hierarchy that its job is not to protect its position of top-down power but to join with the citizens in serving the public interest. That difference is key to democracy and to effective public service generally, including public education. Roger was fond of quoting from the Declaration of Independence, especially the last words: “We mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.” As far as Roger was concerned, that pledge is still in force, and it applies to all of us: people coming together because they need and respect one another is the essence of what our democracy is about.

People coming together because they need and respect one another is the essence of what our democracy is about.

It has seemed obvious to me that the Faye Kings and Betty Caudills have far more to offer to children’s learning than do politicians and bureaucrats—so obvious that I believed that it would be obvious to just about everybody. All that is needed, I have thought, is for the public to understand what is obvious. I believed, from my own long experience in hierarchies, that the top-down people would defer to informed citizens. But I was naive; I was looking at bureaucratic forces through my own eyes—eyes trained by own specialized experience. I thought, to borrow words from David Mathews, that in our democracy citizens are not the customers of government, rather they “own the store.”

But our democracy doesn’t always work the way I have thought it is supposed to work. In the case of public education, we have been using a top-down, industrial-

style system for so long that we take for granted that top-down is the way things are supposed to be. Learning must take place, we tend to assume, in classrooms with a “teacher” dispensing compartmentalized information that the students are supposed to remember long enough to pass tests. Given this public perception, the hierarchies—state school boards and state superintendents, federal education bureaucrats, legislative committees in Washington and state capitals, and others with hierarchical power—are free to be as top-down as they want to be. The Faye Kings, Betty Caudills, and other educators who deeply believe that students must be active participants if learning is to be effective find themselves outranked in a world in which active involvement with real life doesn’t count.

One of my wisest old friends summed up the situation this way: “You can’t nurture on an industrial scale.” My friend is correct, but you certainly wouldn’t know it from the huge consolidated schools that are replacing community schools, or from the top-down coercive policies that separate young people from the life of their communities.

I have seen example after example of superb educators subordinating themselves to hierarchies, and doing so without realizing that they are, in effect, giving power to those hierarchies. The net result of this educator support of hierarchies is that political power, not education, is the real order of business when public education policies are set. That order of business almost invariably results in a reinforcement of top-down policies emphasizing the same old stuff. More tests, more memorizing, more bonuses for bureaucrats, longer school days, and more political bureaucratic pretending that more top-down “accountability” and less learning from real life is just what we need.

We are doing damage to the children when we look down at them and their teachers and their communities; but we keep right on looking down.

Students must be active participants if learning is to be effective.



THE EXCHANGE OF VALUE

CONCLUDED SOME TIME AGO THAT IF PUBLIC EDUCATION POLICIES ARE TO BE CORRECTED, THE IMPETUS HAS TO COME FROM THE CITIZENRY.

Educators cannot be effective in correcting this problem because the problem is about politics more than education. This conclusion is not just mine alone, and it is not just about educational politics. Many people who understand the workings of hierarchies have been calling for institutions to change from top-down to grassroots. The most persuasive such voice from the business world is that of Dee Hock, the founder of the Visa credit card system. Hock coined the word *chaordic* to emphasize that, while we need order, including a system that uses money to measure the value of things, we also need chaos. In his book *One from Many*, Hock writes, “The nonmonetary

exchange of value is the most effective, constructive system ever devised. Evolution and nature have been perfecting it for thousands of millennia. It requires no currency, contracts, government, laws, courts, police, economists, lawyers, or accountants. It does not require anointed or certified experts of any kind. It requires only ordinary, caring people.”

There are other voices from the world of business that agree with Hock, but there are also voices from that world that have signed on with the hierarchies. The Business Roundtable, as a prominent example, has been on record as supporting standardized testing and the top-down controlling systems that go with the testing. Today, the top-downers in the business world are heard at policy levels but the Dee Hocks are not. As a result of the alliance of business groups and political/bureaucratic special interests, we citizens are being told that the key to America’s competitiveness in the world economy is to have a highly competent workforce, and that the way to have such workers is to force teachers to force young people to memorize facts instead of thinking. This is foolishness to an amazing degree. Albert Einstein would be appalled; he knew very well that “imagination is more important than knowledge.”

When we add this all together it seems clear to me that our foolishness is at the root of our problem. I have believed—and I still believe—that we citizens, especially we elders, can go a long way toward getting rid of the political foolishness if we will remind ourselves that our citizenship gives us not only obligations but license to take action. We know, when we stop to think, that our founding fathers didn’t fight a war

Albert Einstein knew very well that “imagination is more important than knowledge.”

just so we can defer to the equivalent of King George III's top-down, powdered-wig crowd.

Our respect for our citizenship is not all that we have going for us. When the children are turned over to top-down hierarchies, they are separated from the people in their communities, including grandparents. There are, I am told, close to 70 million grandparents in the country and, based upon what I have seen of grandparents, at least 69.999 million of those deeply love their grandchildren. That love is not going to change: it is in the grandparent DNA. And there's no difference between the DNA in Republican grandparents and that in Democratic grandparents. In the eyes of grandparents, children outrank all politicians and bureaucrats. Looking down on children and their teachers puts the top-down fixers directly at odds with the deep-seated values of 70 million grandparents, and that's not where competent politicians should choose to stay.

We grandparents and other elders know that effective learning can't be separated from life. And we know, also, that the children need us and that we need the children. Furthermore, we know that we don't need to kowtow to hierarchies. Our experience, plus our special relationship with children, equips us to make a difference, and if we don't make a difference we are in default on our duties as grandparents.

Seventy million grandparents, plus lots of other people whose DNA strongly connects them with children, constitute a huge cadre of willing and able volunteers. I also see evidence that scholars in a wide variety of fields recognize the need to connect information and knowledge from different fields. The word *holistic* is often used in connection with efforts to get beyond the compartmentalization that has characterized much of academic work. This emphasis on connections provides conceptual support for community building; people who come together in common cause naturally tend to act holistically—they do what it takes to get the job done.

The scholars who are providing conceptual support for holistic connections are valuable to public education even when their primary emphasis is not on education but rather is on the economy, healthcare, or other basic aspects of our society, including democracy itself. Those scholars help make it clear that issues related to education are inseparable from other societal issues, and that we cannot effectively deal with educational policies by themselves. As Wendell Berry might put it, this is not a job for “one-eyed experts.”



THE HOME TEAM ADVANTAGE

SOME TIME AGO, *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* PUBLISHED A STORY THAT, IN THE WORDS OF ONE OF MY FRIENDS, “PUT THE FODDER DOWN WHERE WE LITTLE CALVES CAN GET IT.” The article, excerpted from *Scorecasting*, by Tobias J. Moskowitz and L. Jon Wertheim, explained something that had long puzzled me: why home sports teams win more games than visiting teams. I was a basketball player of mediocre ability in high school and college, and then I was a high school referee for a few years. When I was a player, we took for granted that we would do better at home than on the road. Why? It wasn’t that we were tired from travel; most of the trips were short. And it wasn’t that we did such things as shoot more accurately on our home court.

The *Scorecasting* research solved the puzzle. Referees respond to the crowd subconsciously—they aren’t aware that they are favoring the home team. I don’t suggest that public policy issues are as simple as sports contests, but I believe it is accurate to say that the top-down political/bureaucratic forces often favor the equivalent of the home crowd without realizing that they are doing so. Walk around in any capitol building in the country and you will see lobbyists who have no specific legislative objective but are there to be seen; those lobbyists are working to create a home court advantage for themselves. They want the legislators to feel some of what referees feel.

What the sports research adds is a stronger realization that we citizens can create home courts ourselves—we don’t need to go into the world of political power.

What the sports research suggests is conceptually simple. By creating the equivalent of home-court crowds for the children, we can cause legislators and other public policy “referees” to want to make calls that favor children’s learning rather than top-down systems. This represents no change in where I believe we need to go—it is essentially what Faye King and Betty Caudill and their soul mates have been saying all along. What the sports research adds is a stronger realization that we citizens can create home courts ourselves—we don’t need to go into the world of political power.

Pie in the sky? I might think so if I hadn’t seen what happens when the venue changes. At Linefork, which is the example I am closest to, it is just about impossible to tell the difference between the general citizenry and the public officials; they are all on the same team, and they are all needed, including all generations.

Changing venues, as I have seen, can result in changed policies, and the changes can, in fact, come from a spirit of sharing. There is no place for arrogance or for the ignorance that goes with arrogance on home courts such as Linefork, and that means

there can be less foolishness—less of such things as pretending that memorizing information is better than thinking.

I was privy to a conversation at Linefork that demonstrates the difference in venues. Some of the Linefork volunteers, both young and old, were thinking ahead as to what they should do after they were satisfied that their work was succeeding in bringing the American chestnut tree back to the mountains. That thinking session resulted in a decision to videotape what they were doing; a video would, for example, show how to separate a chestnut sprout from the long-dead roots that still produce sprouts. Those videos could be shared with any and all communities in the chestnut range—that is all of Appalachia, from North Georgia and Alabama to Maine. The people in that tiny Kentucky mountain community are demonstrating a spirit of sharing that I regard as not only beautiful but essential.

I once heard David Mathews sum up the education problem and the solution. The problem, he said, is that we need to “re-conceptualize” public education from the vantage point of communities, and the best way to do that is to actively involve the citizenry in community projects. This may sound overly simplistic, but it gets at the core reason why education reforms have been tried, and have failed, for so long. In the absence of an active and informed citizenry, public education policies remain under the control of forces that are biased in favor of control by top-down hierarchies. Mathews’ book *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy* does a convincing job of explaining how and why public education and political democracy are intertwined.

Why is it so difficult to understand that all of us together have more to offer the children than do hierarchies? I believed, for a number of years, that I could best contribute to better public education by joining with other people such as my fellow ex-bureaucrats, in addition to thoughtful educators, to develop the functional equivalent of procedures manuals. I now know that rules and procedures are incompatible with thinking. I don’t believe we have ever had good public education where rules and procedures outranked thinking, but we certainly won’t succeed in the future if we continue on the no-thinking path. We need to recognize, always, that thinking is a journey rather than a destination. This means that the task before us has two parts: encouraging people and policies that reach for thinking journeys, and discouraging people and policies that reach for no-thinking destinations.

As to encouraging thinking, I hope I have made a convincing case that young people and adults who are working together on projects that matter to the community are in the thinking business. Thinking is required to accomplish such tasks

We need to “re-conceptualize” public education from the vantage point of communities, and the best way to do that is to actively involve the citizenry in community projects.

as restoring chestnut trees to the forests, starting festivals, and so on. Therefore, the most important thing we can do is to encourage more ordinary people to do more community-based work and thinking. And, as the best way to provide that encouragement, we need people working in thinking communities to reinforce one another. Linefork's plans to share videotapes about their chestnut project is a good example of the kind of sharing that can and should happen everywhere.

Dealing with the other category of tasks, discouraging those who want no-thinking destinations, is more complicated. Money is one obvious complicating factor: the hierarchies that control money can and do tell communities that the money will come only if the hierarchies' rules and procedures are followed, with no thinking allowed. Aside from money, status is an issue: it is not easy for people in hierarchies to accept the notion that ordinary people might know as much as bureaucrats. This status issue applies to corporate bureaucrats as much as to government bureaucrats, and

It is not easy for people in hierarchies to accept the notion that ordinary people might know as much as bureaucrats.

this, no doubt, is a big reason why organizations in the business world join with government bureaucrats in promoting no-thinking mandates. An especially complicating factor is the one that cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker noted: some of our nation's most valuable leaders, as part of their "heroic" sense of purpose, promote top-down mandates that they sincerely believe will take us to worthy destinations, such as better test scores for low-income kids.

As an important and continuing part of our mission, we citizens need to become skilled at recognizing top-down no-thinkers. And, even though ego-based *arrogance* will sometimes be the reason for no-thinking, we citizens need to assume that *ignorance* is the bigger problem. We need to give the top-downers the benefit of the doubt. This is important partly because ignorant no-thinkers can learn, but it is important mostly for what it does for us. We citizens who support thinking are not immune to feeling special ourselves. In my own case, when I see particularly onerous top-down mandating, I'm likely to say (almost out loud) something like "stupid S.O.B." I've been tempted many times to organize a modern-day version of a tar-and-feather party to demand that the hierarchies do what we think they ought to do. When I feel such temptations, I remind myself that I am serving my own self-esteem needs, and in the process, I am in effect endorsing top-down power as an acceptable means of fixing the problem. That makes me part of the problem.



OPEN MINDS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

WE CAN GIVE NO-THINKERS THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT WITHOUT DIMINISHING OUR CITIZENS' LICENSE TO TAKE ACTION IN CASES OF HARD-CORE ARROGANCE. Just about everybody will understand that open minds are better at community building than closed minds. I offer a few suggestions for using open minds to help with community building.

We need to be especially supportive of small projects that depend primarily upon volunteers. One of my wise acquaintances, who has been deeply involved in helping set up community festivals in a variety of places, regards smaller local festivals as excellent projects to engage the whole citizenry, old and young. My own experience supports this conclusion.

We need to take advantage of “community foundations”; these local organizations offer a structure for local citizens to provide long-term support for local projects. I believe they can be especially valuable in building what constitutes endowments.

We can build upon the natural partnership that connects young people and elders. Our young people understand that their futures are at stake, and many of them also understand that they are being manipulated by a system that discourages thinking. When this understanding is combined with the wisdom that we elders have acquired from our life's journey, we have the core ingredients for sustainable change. The combination of young people and elders (including 70 million grandparents) can go a long way toward providing the informed citizenry that David Mathews tells us is the most essential element in achieving sustainable reform of public education.

We should seek out and encourage broad-based communities of interests. Forests are an example of such communities, as the Linefork experience shows. Not only do professional foresters care about forests, so do lovers of wildlife and nature in general. Such people tend to want to share their interests with others, and, as a result of this desire, forest-based communities of interest can include people whose primary interests, I have noticed, include history, art, or food and nutrition. With just a bit of imagination, forest-related projects can be broad enough to be of interest to just about everybody in the community. As an example, one community owns a thousand acres or so surrounding what is to be a reservoir for the community's water supply. A partnership of young people and adults is taking an inventory of the plant

Our young people understand that their futures are at stake, and many of them also understand that they are being manipulated by a system that discourages thinking.

life on that property, looking from the vantage point of the wild animals. Their plan is to encourage trees that are of benefit to the animals—competing plants might be cleared away from a small walnut tree, for example.

We citizens need to do everything we can at the community level to encourage and support professional educators who are committed to making students active partners in learning. One benefit from doing this is simply that, with our support, those educators will be better able to resist the pressures from the top-down hierarchies. But there is another reason for citizens to work hard to connect with educators. The field of education, at its best, has much to offer to the learning that communities need to do. The Linefork community, to use my favorite example once again, is being educated. It is learning about itself. The best of our nation's educators have know-how that can contribute to a community's learning about itself.

We must find ways to connect with the best of the “alternative” education people and programs. I won't try to describe how to do that—other people know much more about that. I do know, however, that when young people are regarded as valuable partners in community projects it becomes natural to include all of the youngsters in the projects, not just the kids that fit into particular adult-defined categories.

We citizens need to do everything we can at the community level to encourage and support professional educators who are committed to making students active partners in learning.

Wellness must be seen as a responsibility of the community, not just the responsibility of doctors and other medical professionals. As medical people understand, what people do outside doctors' offices is more important to health than the things done inside the offices. And as I have observed in Linefork and other places, it is not difficult to see that community projects can be connected with health. Going into the forests to find and dig up chestnut sprouts, dancing to bluegrass music, growing community gardens, and many other activities can be highly effective in reducing obesity and otherwise creating healthier communities.

Some higher education institutions are emphasizing wellness. Frontier Nursing University, located in the mountains of Kentucky, started out some nine decades ago as the “Frontier Nursing Service.” The nurses traveled on horseback to provide midwife and other services to people living in isolated areas. Today it offers master's degrees for nurse practitioners and midwives, with 1,500 students now enrolled in its program. The course of study places a strong emphasis on what people in communities can do with and for each other to stay healthy. This is relevant to what David Mathews describes as the most basic question a democratic citizenry can ask: “How can we come together as a community to solve the problems of our community?” Frontier students (and students in many situations where citizens matter) are learning about democracy, but they may not understand that democracy is part of what they are learning.



EVERYBODY BENEFITS

A 2011 *60 MINUTES* SEGMENT ENTITLED “GOSPEL FOR TEENS” FEATURED A GROUP OF YOUNGSTERS GETTING TOGETHER EVERY SATURDAY MORNING TO SING MUSIC OF THE HIGH-ENERGY TYPE THAT HAS BEEN A STAPLE IN OLDER BLACK CHURCHES. The adult organizer of that program, when asked why she wanted the young people to learn gospel music, was emphatic in saying that the objective is not about learning, but about saving the music. The difference between learning the music and saving it is the difference between the children benefitting and everybody benefitting. That is a profound difference. It is the difference that the Faye Kings and Betty Caudills of the world have been reaching for.

A fellow grandparent provided me with a good way to sum up what I am saying. She had retired from a distinguished career in public transportation, in part to spend more time with her three-year-old granddaughter. Together they do such things as grow a garden and explore the woods. That grandmother has learned, largely from the lab lessons the little girl has provided, that, “Children need, above all, to develop confidence, and this is something that grandparents do well but bureaucracies don’t do well.” What that grandmother understands (and what millions more grandparents can understand) boils down to an inversion of just one letter in the alphabet: the letter “w,” as in “we,” has become the letter “m,” as in “me.” I don’t believe I need to elaborate further.

Bob Cornett, Grandparent

Georgetown, Kentucky



*Kettering
Foundation*

www.kettering.org

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459 (937) 434-7300; (800) 221-3657

444 North Capitol Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001 (202) 393-4478

6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016 (212) 686-7016