

# The Public and the Public Schools: The Coproduction of Education

The public is losing its sense of ownership of its schools, which threatens democracy itself, Mr. Mathews asserts. And as long as citizens are treated as mere consumers of education, the problem will not be solved.

BY DAVID MATHEWS



**F**OR SOME time, my colleagues at the Kettering Foundation and I have been concerned that the public schools are losing their connection to a democratic public and that citizens are losing their sense of ownership and responsibility for these schools. Lately, we have also begun to worry that the connection between professional educators and democracy may be weakening. If that is the case, the education professions will become less fulfilling, and the idealism that has inspired young people to enter the field will drain away.

And even more will be lost. The professional literature has a good deal to say about the ways that public schools serve democracy. I am proposing that more attention be given to the corollary — the ways in which democracy undergirds public education. One of those

ways is through the public's coproduction of education.

Since the words "democracy" and "public" have many different meanings, let me be clear about which of the many definitions I have in mind. By "democracy," I mean what the word implies: self-rule or rule by the people. Self-rule isn't confined to elections and representative government or to what citizens do in relation to the state (pay taxes, obey laws, and the like). Self-rule is rooted in what citizens do with other citizens for their common good — through formal and informal civic

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associations as well as through institutions such as government and schools. For example, in the early days of this country, one of the first things citizens did through their collective efforts was to create public schools to help educate young people.<sup>1</sup>

When I write about “the public,” I am not referring to the array of interest groups that we commonly call “publics.” I am talking about “We, the People” collectively, but with all of our diversity. We become a public, despite our diversity, by doing the work of citizens. This public is more than the names on a census roll; it is a citizenry-in-action, a citizenry joined together in collective efforts. Think of a group of people playing baseball. The work of playing baseball turns them into something they aren’t as individuals — a team. That is similar to the way the public creates itself: citizens join together in small, collective efforts throughout a community.

Those civic enterprises that teach young people how to work with others, that instill a sense of social responsibility, and that provide other important lessons are education in the broadest sense. The coproduction of this education by a democratic public can help make the difference that citizens want to make in schools.

I believe that Americans are more likely to regain their sense of ownership of the public schools if current efforts to build a better relationship between schools and the citizenry go further. Engagement campaigns, accountability standards, and trying to provide good customer service all derived from good impulses, but they don’t necessarily build the public that can exercise responsible ownership. These school initiatives tend to focus on individuals, or they assume that the public already exists as a constituency to be roused by more effective communication. The problem is that the public able to take effective ownership doesn’t exist until citizens, like baseball players, begin to work together. This work has to start where citizens start, which is with their communities rather than just schools and with education broadly rather than just schooling.

Educators have a double stake in looking into how the work that citizens do with other citizens is carried out. Understanding that process not only helps them do their jobs but also connects them with the public, which is a way of connecting to democracy.

## THE CURRENT STRATEGIES

Even though educators might not see restoring public ownership as critical to their primary task, most recognize that their relationship with the public is in trouble and are trying to repair it. In addition, legislative bodies,

representing what they believe the citizenry wants, have passed laws designed to improve that relationship, the most recent of which is No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

**Public engagement.** When educators become concerned about their relationship with the citizenry, they often launch public engagement campaigns in the hope of creating a stronger sense of community responsibility and greater support for the schools. As I’ve said, these efforts often fall short of restoring public responsibility because there is no public capable of taking ownership.

When people work together, their efforts are fueled by the ongoing commitments they make to one another. These commitments generate the momentum needed for civic work. Typical public engagement campaigns tend to rely on external persuasion, which doesn’t produce the same intensity of political will. A persuaded populace isn’t the same as a committed citizenry. Being sold on what others have decided does not create reservoirs of political will. Citizens are more disposed to take ownership of decisions they have helped to make rather than decisions that have been made for them.

**Greater accountability.** Another widely touted means of establishing a better relationship with the public is through greater accountability. The objective is to restore public confidence in the schools. Yet the citizenry that places confidence in an institution is not the same as the public that exercises responsible ownership.

In addition, even though almost everyone believes that the schools should be accountable to the citizenry, the kind of accountability the law provides and the accountability the public wants are not the same. First, who should be held accountable? Holding educators solely responsible for what children learn is popular, yet, on reflection, citizens will admit that they, too, are accountable. Second, today’s accountability standards, which rely on test scores, strike citizens as limited and bureaucratic. The accountability that people do want is more relational than informational. Americans don’t object to using test scores, but they think the scores should be used for diagnostic purposes rather than for punitive ones. Citizens want face-to-face accountability, with educators giving a full account of what happens in classrooms and on playgrounds. Most legislated accountability measures don’t create a relationship of shared responsibility. Instead, the laws leave citizens on the outside looking in.

**Customer service.** These days, the most common strategies for restructuring the relationship between the public and the schools treat citizens as consumers. Such a relationship is implied in accountability measures that

make the inner workings of the schools more transparent so parents can be better informed. And school officials are often attracted by the assumption that customer satisfaction will solve many of their problems with the citizenry, perhaps because our culture values consumerism.

Yet this focus on consumerism leads to the unfortunate tendency to equate *parents* with the *public* and to substitute parental engagement with the schools for public engagement with education. Of course, listening to parents is essential for educators. But people with school-age children make up only about one-third of the population, and, even if all of them were supportive, they would not constitute the public that the schools need.<sup>2</sup>

There are other downsides to consumerism. Even when people are satisfied customers, they are likely to blame the “manufacturer” when something goes wrong. Citizens with a consumer mindset believe their job is to watch educators the way they watch a “cashier making change.” Children sometimes adopt this point of view, as well, believing that they should help “keep the school in line.” Classroom teachers are quick to feel the effects, and they complain that educating children is doubly difficult if it is seen as solely their responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

## ANOTHER STRATEGY

**Starting with communities and education.** Given the limitations of the current measures for restructuring the relationship between the public and the public schools, I am suggesting what may seem to be a counterintuitive strategy: start with communities rather than schools and start with education broadly defined rather than formal instruction. I am not proposing an alternative to public schools, but rather a way of countering trends that weaken the schools by walling them off from their communities and from other educating institutions. Schools belong in the life of the public.

This strategy follows from the assumption that, if the work of citizens isn’t being done, then there is no public. That means engagement has to be citizen-to-citizen before it can be citizen-to-school. Professionals can’t do the work for citizens, but they can remain attentive to how citizens’ work takes place and to the effect they can have on it.

The strategy of starting with citizens is based on

what the Kettering Foundation has learned about how citizens become engaged. In studying the relationship people wish they had with the public schools, we have been struck by the connection citizens make between schools and communities. Those who have a positive attitude toward schools consider the schools to be their

partners — not just in improving the instruction of students but also in improving the community. People who aren’t parents share this mindset.

Kettering has also been struck by the different response researchers get when people are asked about “education” as opposed to “schools.” Normally, people use the two words interchangeably. Yet when they stop to reflect, the differences stand out. Asked to describe where education occurs, people talk not just about schools but also about houses of worship, zoos, youth organizations, and, most of all, the workplace. These are the places where a good deal of the coproduction of education occurs. And in such real-world contexts, young people learn many of the things they also learn in schools: skills and values, science and mathematics, languages and cultures.<sup>4</sup>

While most formal instruction seems best left to professionals, citizens believe they too can educate. And what children learn in other educating institutions can reinforce what is happening in schools. Such a process is occurring in Kentucky, where a farm for retired race horses is being used to teach everything from history

to biology, and in Alabama, where such contextual learning is being promoted by a new organization known as PACERS (Program for the Academic and Cultural Enhancement of Rural Schools).<sup>5</sup> We have heard similar stories from other states. The citizens who organize these initiatives pull the community together around a project and then bring the young people into it as a means of enriching their education. This is community organizing with a twist — the coproduction of education.

Throughout the country, Kettering researchers have found that the more people talk about education, the more they turn their attention to their communities and to educating institutions outside of schools. Seeing the numerous opportunities to educate in her community, a woman from Baton Rouge reasoned that there should be “a community strategy, not a school strategy, for educating every single child.”<sup>6</sup>



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Some people have taken the insight about a community strategy to its logical conclusion, which is that the community itself is an educational institution. From this perspective, the role of schools is to support communities in their role as producers of education. That upends the conventional wisdom that schools are the primary educators and that the only role for citizens is to support them. But this reconceptualization doesn't make schools less important. Studies have shown that governments are more effective and popular when communities are not totally dependent on them, when they also have civic associations that they can use to solve problems.<sup>7</sup> The same should be true for schools.

**Engaging citizens.** Citizens who are trying to improve their communities by organizing projects that will enrich the education of young people are doing the work that forms a public. To get a better understanding of how this work is done, the foundation began analyzing what citizens do with other citizens.

Engaging in the work of education begins long before the decision to act is made. To begin, people have to identify or name the problems that interfere with the education of young people in a way that suggests actions they might take. Then they have to come up with options for solving the problems and recognize the tradeoffs that have to be made. This creates a framework for decision making on critical issues. As citizens weigh the pros and cons of the various options, they deliberate. And after people have made decisions, they must commit their resources to implementing what they have decided. Ideally, people are aware of and in a position to employ the range of a community's resources in mutually reinforcing ways.

The most critical factor of all seems to be what people learn along the way about themselves as a public. Naming problems, framing issues, and so on are not simply tasks in collective work; they are opportunities to learn. If citizens think of what they are doing as civic learning, they will be less likely to stop when they encounter obstacles and will be in a better position to learn from failures.

Obviously, professional educators also name problems, frame issues, and so on. Yet their names and frameworks are different from those of citizens, as are their ways of making decisions. One way is not better than the other; they differ because citizens have different work to do than school folks, even though educators are themselves citizens.

Take the matter of naming or identifying problems. People have to identify problems in terms that are meaningful to them, in terms that capture the invaluable intangibles that can generate political will. We can de-

scribe crime statistically, of course, but what people value is safety or being secure from danger. There is no number we can assign to this feeling of security. When the names given to problems reflect people's experiences and the things they consider most valuable, they all become stakeholders and have an incentive to do the work of citizens.

Like all professionals, educators usually name problems in ways that reflect their expertise and the solutions their professions provide. This is perfectly natural. Nonetheless, professional terms can easily obscure the way citizens name problems. I recall Wendell Berry's story of an economist explaining that it was cheaper to rent land than to buy it, only to be challenged by a farmer who pointed out that his ancestors didn't come to America to be renters.<sup>8</sup> Although the economist may have been technically correct, the name of the problem wasn't just profitability. The farmer was concerned about maintaining a way of life he valued and the independence that owning land provided. Such concerns may not be readily apparent, and they can't be determined simply by interviewing individuals. People have to talk with one another to sort out what is most valuable to them collectively.

Arguably, there needs to be a greater appreciation for the differences between the way citizens do their work and the way professionals do theirs. The two ways should complement each other rather than collide. It should be possible to carry on professional routines in ways that make it easier for citizens to do their work. Educators don't have to do more than they are already doing; they can just do differently what they ordinarily do.

One concrete example of what professionals have done to engage citizens has been to promote deliberative public forums on issues that affect both the schools and the community. When people deliberate, they weigh various options for action against the likely consequences of those actions for the things that are deeply valuable

to them. Citizens work with other citizens to make difficult choices.

Many of these forums have taken up issues related to persistent problems, such as juvenile violence. Other forums have dealt with the challenges of work-force development, economic revitalization, and health care.<sup>9</sup> While few of the deliberations have been solely about schools, all have had implications for educators. School officials haven't always led the forums, yet they have gained valuable information about the public by listening.

Hearing the names citizens give problems, for instance, can help experts take into account the things people consider most valuable. (Forums also provide opportunities for professional educators to share publicly their understanding of a problem.) At a minimum, professionals can be sensitive to not using the power of their offices to impede, even unintentionally, the work of citizens. Implementing exclusively professional solutions to problems without regard for collective actions that citizens might take can burden schools with problems that only the community can remedy. These problems — poverty, drug abuse, crime — send children off on a trajectory that schools alone are hard pressed to redirect. Controversy over sex education can mask the larger problem of teen pregnancy; lack of discipline in classrooms can be a symptom of an increase in youth violence. Deliberative forums have helped to reframe such issues as matters that a community as a whole must address. Only a democratic citizenry can deal with problems that are deeply rooted in our society.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROFESSION

Schools were made *public* for democratic, not pedagogical, reasons. And the educators who administer schools and teach in them are unique among professionals in their historic relationship to democracy. The young people who are drawn into this field are still imbued with the ideals of self-rule — a belief in equity and justice, in each person's freedom to achieve his or her potential, in respect for differences, in our obligations to one another and to society. Educators need the support of a community that recognizes the value of such ideals.

The Kettering Foundation has heard that it is now possible to be trained for a career in public education without giving much thought to what a democratic public is or does. If that is so, it's unfortunate.

While teaching is a practical profession properly concerned with quantifiable results, it is far more than that. Methods and test results are one thing; democracy is

another. There may be sciences of instruction and management that can lead to better outcomes in the classroom, but there is no science of democracy. Democracy depends on trial and error and our ability to figure out what is best even as we constantly redefine what "best" means. The present climate, however, compels educators to look for proven successes rather than to experiment. As a harried superintendent told me, "I don't have the freedom to fail." That worries me because such a climate makes innovation in education difficult at a time when we sorely need it.

Understanding how citizens do their work in the coproduction of education and how we might all work to restore public ownership might seem annoyingly irrelevant when under pressure to raise test scores. Yet how citizens come to rule themselves and form a public capable of exercising responsible ownership would seem to be an essential subject for anyone dedicated to the well-being of the next generation.

The profession of public education presupposes knowledge of the public, and this kind of knowledge can only come from experience with citizens who are doing their proper work. Of all the professions, education is — perhaps, by its very nature — the most democratic.

1. I discuss the early public schools in the United States in detail in *Why Public Schools? Whose Public Schools? What Early Communities Have to Tell Us* (Montgomery, Ala.: NewSouth Books, 2003).

2. U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Table H2: Household by Type, Age of Members, Region of Residence, and Age, Race and Hispanic Origin of Householder: 2006, All Races," *America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2006*, [www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2006.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2006.html).

3. The idea of parents as consumers is described in Doble Research Associates, *A Consumer Mentality: The Prevailing Mind-Set in American Public Education* (Dayton: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1999), pp. 2, 9-10, 12-13, 17-18, and 29-30.


4. Doble Research Associates, *Summaries of Five Research Projects* (Dayton: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1995), pp. 1-5.

5. PACERS is a cooperative association of rural schools in Alabama. It has used solar homes, greenhouses, fishponds, and newsrooms as learning laboratories, and these efforts have had a positive impact on classroom performance. See Jack Shelton, *Consequential Learning: A Public Approach to Better Schools* (Montgomery, Ala.: NewSouth Books, 2005), pp. 69-70, 100-9.

6. John Doble to Damon Higgins and Randa Slim, memorandum, "Report on CEFI Community Leadership Workshop Baton Rouge, LA, 6/23/93," 19 July 1993, p. 4.

7. Vaughn L. Grisham, Jr., *Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community* (Dayton: Kettering Foundation Press, 1999); and Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

8. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986), p. viii.

9. A library of guides for deliberative forums on most major issues can be accessed through the website of the National Issues Forums Institute at [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org). 

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