

From the Kettering Foundation...

Public Schools and the Practices of Engaged Communities

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One unintended consequence of the standards movement in public education is the growing recognition that many critical challenges to more effective education exist not in the schools, but in the communities the schools are charged to serve. More educators have come to recognize—or have been forced to admit—that the success of their work requires active collaboration of parents and other community actors.

A result has been a growing view that public schools need to be more deliberately public; that is, more closely connected to their communities. The last few years have seen a remarkable increase in the number of professional educators, scholars, and civic organizations exploring the theme of reconnecting schools and communities. However, these efforts expose widely varying meanings of community, and of the ways schools may better engage with them.

For many, communities are, in effect, the customers. Engagement thus refers mostly to communication with parents as the main recipients of school services. Some see communities as the locus of resources that need to be brought into the schools. Others see communities—especially those in low-income urban and rural regions—as problems to overcome rather than as resources to build upon. A result, as one analyst recently noted, is that while partnership has become a mantra, efforts to achieve partnership are “still too often seen as a sideshow.”

The Kettering Foundation’s research has developed an alternative insight into the problem. The challenge appears not to be as simple as how to engage communities, however, they might be defined. In too many communities the problem appears to be a lack of public capacity to be engaged.

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Instead of moving closer to the public schools, Americans are moving away. People without children sometimes deny a responsibility for the schools, saying that falls on parents. Parents, however, may feel accountable for their own children, but not for children generally. Many Americans no longer believe the public schools are their schools.