



Creating a Culture of Learning in St. Paul: A Framework to Improve Children's Learning

From a paper for the Kettering Foundation
By Nan Kari and Nan Skelton

The Public Work of Improving Learning in St. Paul was excerpted from a June 2010 paper for the Kettering Foundation. *Creating a Culture of Learning in St. Paul: A Framework to Improve Children's Learning* is available at www.publicwork.org.

About the authors

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Kari has led several initiatives in democratic renewal in a variety of settings – in a nursing home, higher education, and the West Side neighborhood in association with the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College. She co-founded the Jane Addams School for Democracy, a civic engagement and democratic initiative for immigrant families and college students located in St. Paul's multi-cultural West Side neighborhood. She co-authored *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* and *Voices of Hope: The Story of the Jane Addams School for Democracy*. She has many published articles and chapters on public engagement, cross-cultural work, and institutional renewal.

Nan Skelton is co-director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College. She leads the center's work on issues of civic education, reclaiming neighborhoods, and the democratic renewal of education. She is a co-founder of the Jane Addams School for Democracy and co-founder of the Neighborhood Learning Community, both based in the West Side neighborhood of St. Paul, Minnesota. She also serves on the Saint Paul Mayor's Second Shift Commission, which is developing a new approach through Saint Paul's parks, recreation centers, and libraries to extend the learning day for young people.

Prior to joining the center, Skelton was an assistant commissioner with the Minnesota Department of Education where she provided leadership on youth development legislation, AIDS education, school-to-work initiatives, and dropout prevention research with the National Governor's Association. She also served as a program officer in the Lilly Endowment's Education Division, and founded and directed several community-based nonprofit organizations in the Twin Cities.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge Catherine Penkert and Kari Denissen Cunnien of the City of Saint Paul, Harry Boyte, Derek Johnson, Maria McNamara and Erik Skold of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, and David Scheie of Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry for their contributions to this report.

Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is an independent, nonpartisan research organization rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. The foundation explores ways that key political practices can be strengthened through innovations that emphasize active roles for citizens. Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what

The State of Our Education System

A Nation at Risk, the seminal report issued in 1983 by the U.S. Department of Education, heightened national efforts to reform public education. Yet in its follow-up report written 25 years later, *A Nation Accountable*, the Department of Education asserted, “If we were ‘at risk’ in 1983, we are at even greater risk now.”¹ What happened?

In the past 25 years, education reform has been school-centered and focused primarily on standards, testing, and teacher quality. In 2001, a bipartisan Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), comprehensive federal legislation enacting standards-based education reform measured by assessments developed in each state. Diane Ravitch, an influential education scholar and assistant secretary of education in the first Bush administration, was a strong supporter of the NCLB school reform launched by President George W. Bush’s administration. Nine years later she reversed position. In her latest book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravitch concludes that NCLB strategies to improve schools such as standardized testing, charter schools, market choice, and accountability do not work. “I was known as a conservative advocate of many of these policies,” says Ravitch. “But I’ve looked at the evidence and I’ve concluded they’re wrong. They’ve put us on the wrong track.”²

Many people express grave concern about the state of our country’s education system. Yet as debate about school reform gains momentum with new proposals for *Race to the Top* funding opportunities and revision of NCLB, the buzz is focused on improving the education marketplace rather than recognizing education as a public good. It follows then that little attention is given to the potential role that citizens and communities can play in improving learning for children.

Our experience working with children and families in neighborhoods over the last 15 years underlines the critical role that dense social networks play in the support of learning inside and outside formal classrooms. If we assume that learning is consigned to institutions and occurs between seven and three o’clock Monday through Friday, then we’ve identified both the problem and the resources far too narrowly. Education reform and neighborhood engagement ought not be separated. Schools alone cannot fix our current education problems.

¹ U.S. Department of Education, *A Nation Accountable: Twenty-five Years After A Nation at Risk*, Washington, D.C., 2008. <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/accountable>

² National Public Radio, Morning Edition, March 2, 2010, Interviewer, Steve Inskeep.

Neighborhoods Matter

Lawrence Cremin, an educational historian and student of John Dewey, argued for a holistic definition of education to be understood in ecological terms. Education, Cremin thought, should take into account a range of complex learning interactions. Interaction among individual experience and background, broader social influences, institutions, technology and schooling, and other factors, all contribute to growth and learning. People of all ages learn in webs of non-school settings; in libraries, museums, urban centers, factories, offices, social settings, through media and in neighborhoods. In these places, people encounter a variety of curricula and pedagogies—though they may not be named as such—constituting a rich array of learning resources and opportunities.

More than a decade of youth development research concludes that for young people to flourish, they need much more than academic skills. They also must learn to be productive contributors, to establish healthy relationships, to connect meaningfully with peers and adults, and to navigate the structures and opportunities their communities offer. Skills in communication, critical thinking, and problem solving are essential for young people, as are hope for the future and the belief that they can lead and contribute.

Ample research in the last decade confirms the need for partnerships between schools and community organizations, between parents and schools, and among community programs to promote children’s learning. National models like Communities in Schools coordinate and connect needed community resources with children in their schools. However, programs that deliver services—*doing to* and *doing for* children—reinforce the notion of education as a private good and do little to address the development of skills described above.

Neighborhood-centered learning names the full spectrum of learning vital to children and youth. It enlists businesses and libraries, schools and community centers, even rivers and parks, as places of learning for everyone. Neighborhood learning communities connect to a city’s wider resources and infrastructure, but reclaim a strong, local role in nurturing children and young people.

Trends in community life across the country point to increased fear and isolation among citizens, and a decline of many neighborhoods due to economic stress. Many families no longer work or go to school in the places where they live. Frequently, all adults in a household work outside the home. As a result, children often lead highly structured lives, participating in many activities away from the neighborhoods where they live. Neighborhood learning communities counter this disconnection from place.



Using a Public Work Approach

Public work—sustained work of civic value, done over time with a mix of people to improve our common lives—is an approach that will address the roots of our education challenges. Public work demands that professionals such as teachers and youth workers, parents, and even young people claim their responsibility as citizens for our shared resources.

When citizens are engaged in community life and learning throughout a lifetime, their capacity to adapt to change and to assist in rebuilding communities grows. The democratic processes and products of public work will help build the foundation for a different narrative of education for our society.

In 1996, with others at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, we began work in St. Paul, Minnesota, to create a public space where diverse groups of ordinary people and professionals could work together to invent new approaches to education dilemmas commonly experienced by immigrant families. At what became the Jane Addams School for Democracy, we learned new ways of doing place-based democratic work and taught ourselves how to cross cultural borders.

Nearly a decade ago, the Jane Addams School for Democracy, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, and several community based organizations launched a neighborhood learning initiative in St. Paul's West Side neighborhood. The underlying assumption: when learning is visible and available throughout the neighborhood, and when many people of all ages are involved in teaching and learning, a *culture of learning* can be co-created to improve children's learning.

In 2007, St. Paul's East Side neighborhood began to implement a similar neighborhood learning community model with its own distinctive stamp. With financial support from the Minnesota Department of Education and private foundations, the West Side and East Side neighborhoods created and implemented *a coordinated network of people and organizations that work together to build relationships with children and youth in order to strengthen learning and support their holistic, healthy development.*

West Side Neighborhood Learning Community

Residents, plus representatives from 15 organizations—a neighborhood development corporation, public and private schools, parks and recreation, 4H, Girl Scouts, Youth Farm and Market, and Augsburg College—provided coordination to expand and strengthen after-school and summer learning opportunities for youth.

- Developed an innovative transportation model—the circulator bus—which provides free reliable transportation for young people to sites of learning around the neighborhood after school and in the summer. Reached 100,000th ride in 2009.
- Developed 10 weeks of neighborhood-based summer camps for kids in grades K-5, with opportunities for adult residents to teach and older youth to provide mentoring and leadership.
- Added more than 30 after school programs across four schools, one recreation center, and one community center.
- Developed programming for school release days.
- Secured more than \$1 million in funding from the Minnesota Department of Education, in addition to support from private foundations.

East Side Learning Collaborative

Residents, plus representatives from 25 organizations—two neighborhood councils, arts organizations, the University of Minnesota and Metropolitan State University, recreation centers, schools, libraries, Boys & Girls Club, YMCA, and other youth-serving organizations—worked together to create a community where young people learn, grow, and lead.

- Worked with City of Saint Paul to establish neighborhood circulator bus, modeled on West Side circulator. Operating every summer since 2007.
- Supported expansion of existing after school programs through a partnership between parks and recreation, community education, a neighborhood arts organization, a local university, and others.
- Developed programming for school release days.
- Created 10 weeks of neighborhood-based summer camps.
- Published and distributed the East Side Youth Guide listing all the after-school and summer programs for youth on the East Side.
- Provided ongoing professional development for youth workers in the community.

Co-creating a Neighborhood Learning Community

In addition to a public work philosophy, the West Side and East Side neighborhoods share five core elements in their approach to learning. These core elements developed over time.

Learning-focused. Life-long learning is encouraged and modeled by parents, neighbors, youth workers and other adults. Adults have opportunities for leadership development and mentoring. Learning for children and young teens and older youth includes life skills such as cooking and fitness, leadership development, and apprenticeships as well as reinforcement for academic subjects through science, technology, and communications projects.

Collaborative politics. Citizens, including young people, business owners, organization staff, teachers and others who work in the neighborhood, drive the process. Engagement in public work ultimately contributes to strong commitment and ownership, public accountability, and strengthened civic identities.

Place-based. Stories and exploration of the community's history, geography, and accomplishments intentionally woven into the design of learning experiences help children and adults strengthen their connection to the place where they live and/or work.

Flexible and structured. A neighborhood learning community requires structure for stability and coherence, but must be flexible enough to allow for innovation and new opportunities. In this model, no single entity holds power; rather, a neighborhood coordinating council including residents and organization and city staff provides high-level coordination of people, programs, and transportation. Built-in features of dialogue and reflection yield ideas for creative experimentation.

Connected to larger systems. Neighborhoods alone cannot easily sustain a learning community. Citywide agencies and systems contribute important resources as well as system-wide policies that respond to local issues. Navigating political dynamics between government, public schools, and neighborhoods is an area of critical importance requiring relationship building and skill development in naming and framing problems and their solutions.



Neighborhood Learning Community—Key Infrastructure Elements (continued)

Evaluation and data systems. We began this work with a strong conviction that participatory evaluation undergirds public work—that citizens can analyze information and use it to inform decisions. With guidance from professional evaluators, we created an evaluation plan, designed straightforward data collection tools—both quantitative and qualitative—and contracted with an online service to store and provide first level data analysis. The coordinating council conducts annual interviews of parents, community teachers, program leaders, and children and older youth to better understand learning experiences and identify needed changes. Building a common neighborhood data collection system that all partnering organizations contribute to is challenging. It has taken time and public accountability to increase organization cooperation in a shared system, but it is necessary to understand the growth and impact of a neighborhood based approach to learning.

Ongoing professional development. People who work with youth are notoriously underpaid, work odd hours, and earn few benefits. Consequently, morale is often low and turnover high. To counter these pressures, the East Side and West Side neighborhoods have invested in the professional development of youth workers by engaging them in peer learning seminars facilitated by faculty from the University of Minnesota. Youth workers' language and perspectives now reflect a stronger professional identity, and they report successes in developing programming based on youth interests as well as needs. On the West Side, professional development opportunities also extend to parents and older youth who help to lead neighborhood summer camps for children.

Learning conferences. Neighborhoods need a public space and occasion to bring people together for sharing experiences, planning critical reflection, and celebration. Annual neighborhood learning conferences gather participants from East and West Side neighborhoods, including youth to share experiences, review and make meaning of data collected, and make plans for the coming year. Public officials, program officers, and policy makers also frequently attend. These learning conferences have proved a successful venue to engage a broader group in networking and professional development, and to connect with the civic work underway.

Building a City-wide System to Support a Neighborhood Learning Community

In our work to improve learning for children, we have found that significant decision-making authority resides outside the neighborhood, often in places and systems inaccessible to ordinary citizens. It is clear that a larger city scaffolding is needed to accomplish the education change we envision—change based on reciprocal relationships, common agreements and practices, and a shared knowledge base. We also recognize the need for a different political dynamic between the city and neighborhoods, one in which citizens, community-based organizations, government agencies, and schools work together to improve education.

It will take more than a well-developed infrastructure however, to shift the way that citizens view their roles and responsibilities in support of children’s learning. In our individually oriented, consumerist society, parents opt for the best educational “product” for their children and schools aim to deliver quality goods. The consumerism and service delivery thus go together like hand and glove and are difficult to interrupt. Further, school systems are shaped by hierarchical and rigid structures, perceived to be out of reach, even though public schools and boards are ultimately accountable to the citizenry. People without school-aged children may vote for tax levies for local school improvement or volunteer as mentors for children. While these may be helpful individual responses, such acts do not build the citizen power base needed to change systems, let alone change our narrowed view of learning as the sole realm of schools.

Using work in the East Side and West Side neighborhoods as a foundation, the City of Saint Paul, the Mayor’s 2nd Shift Commission, and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship initiated a project in 2009 called *Learning in Cities* that focuses on creating a culture of learning that spans city neighborhoods. The overall aim is to shift the educational system from a school-centered approach to one that utilizes the agency of whole communities, including children, families, and many institutions. Our initial organizing efforts have focused on building relationships and power across city systems and neighborhood networks to develop the architecture necessary to create a comprehensive out-of-school time system aligned with school-based learning.

Conclusion

Lawrence Cremin⁴ describes the fundamental problem in U.S. education as “the tendency to focus so exclusively on the potentialities of the school as a lever of social improvement and reform as to ignore the possibilities of other educative institutions.” He describes an ecology of learning where “each...institution within a configuration interacts with the others and with the larger society that sustains it and that is in turn affected by it.” The education of each child, he argues, “emerges from the interplay, or lack of interplay, of the various elements within the configuration.” This dynamic, he believed, could fuel individual growth and development and strengthen society. Yet the dominant discourse in education reform focuses mainly on schooling, narrowing our conceptions of learning and the resources that could be brought to bear.

Our experience in two of St. Paul’s neighborhoods has shown that important learning happens in communities with diverse resources that are mobilized for children. The architecture to support this expanded learning requires sustained public work undertaken by young people, communities, elected officials and professionals, all of whom see themselves as citizens working to improve a shared public life.

Through their public work, people in St. Paul have begun to craft a new narrative that will reposition neighborhoods and cities as major contributors to education reform and, ultimately, bring excitement and joy of learning to the lives of all children.

⁴ Lawrence Cremin, *Public Education* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976), 30-31.