# Chapter One

## Introduction
### *The Ecology of Civic Learning*

> Now the change which is coming into our education is the shifting of the center of gravity. It is a change, a revolution, not unlike that introduced by Copernicus when the astronomical center shifted from the earth to the sun.
>
> —John Dewey, *The School and Society*

Education is seen as the only road to a flourishing democracy. We rely on education to prepare citizens for an ongoing commitment to public life. And yet, "American democracy is at risk," according to a new report from the American Political Science Association's first Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement, echoing many previous studies on civic participation.[1] Perhaps part of the problem lies in the way we conceptualize education.

"There is a fundamental problem in the progressive theory of education that I think bears scrutiny by those concerned with the politics of education in contemporary America," begins Lawrence Cremin in his 1975 lecture to the John Dewey Society. Cremin, the former dean of Columbia University's Teachers College who has written extensively on the history of American education, defines the problem as "the tendency to focus so exclusively on the potentialities of the school as a lever of social improvements and reform as to ignore the possibilities of other educative institutions."[2] A narrow educational focus still plagues us today, if anything, it has only gotten worse.

Education has become synonymous with schooling. Since the U.S. Department of Education's National Commission on Excellence in Education warned of the deterioration of American education in *A Nation at Risk*



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in 1983, the crisis in education has become a national priority for people across the ideological spectrum. But it is common for policy makers, educators, parents, and youth to articulate their concerns with the state of our educational system solely in terms of the school. The bipartisan No Child Left Behind federal legislation, for example, set out to improve educational achievement and accountability through the standardization of American schooling.

Efforts to improve civic education among our youngest citizens have also been focused on the classroom. Increasing concern about America's civic health throughout the 1990s culminated in a report entitled *A Nation of Spectators,* issued by the National Commission on Civic Renewal in 1998. The bipartisan commission warned that citizens were becoming apathetic and disengaged from public life and that "in a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators."[3]

In response, an array of reports and initiatives has appeared calling for an increase in the participation of young people in public life. Most proposed interventions, however, have used schools as the primary platform for civic renewal. For example, a diverse group of more than sixty distinguished educational scholars and practitioners convened by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and the Carnegie Corporation issued *The Civic Mission of Schools* and launched the subsequent Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, urging that K–12 schooling become the primary venue for increasing civic education among our nation's youth.[4]

On the surface, this seems to make sense given the time and resources American society devotes to schooling and the social investment we make in schools as instruments for democratic socialization. As *The Civic Mission of Schools* rightly observes, "Schools are the only institutions with the capacity and mandate to reach virtually every person in the country."[5] Yet schools cannot educate in isolation. Equating education with schooling relieves the rest of society from the responsibility of taking part in the education of young people. It also misses the central issue because what happens in schools reflects what happens outside the classroom. Educational successes and failures are mostly the products of communities and families: underachieving schools simply pass along the inequality of resources from families and communities, while high achieving schools pass along family and community privileges.[6] Finally, limiting education to schooling overlooks important assets for improving our educational system and preparing young people to contribute to our democracy—our communities and community institutions.

"Why is it that we have Boards of Education, but they only hire the superintendent of schools?" Lawrence Cremin often asked.[7] He did not

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mean that boards of education should oversee all aspects of learning in society. He was asking us to imagine what would happen if we broadened our definition of education to reach

> beyond the schools and colleges to the multiplicity of individuals and institutions that educate—parents, peers, siblings, and friends, as well as families, churches, synagogues, libraries, museums, summer camps, benevolent societies, agricultural fairs, settlement houses, factories, radio stations, and television networks.[8]

This insight offers new hope both for academic and civic outcomes. Specifically, this book explores why community matters in educating for democracy.

## Protesting a Restricted View

Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House, Chicago's famous settlement house, once described the settlement movement as "a protest against a restricted view of education."[9] This aptly describes the approach to education explored in this book. A more expansive view of education is founded not only in the theory and practice of the settlement movement, but also in the writings of the educational philosopher John Dewey, the experiments with social centers, folk schools, and citizenship schools earlier in the twentieth century, and today's efforts to create community schools, neighborhood learning communities, and engaged colleges and universities.

The three case studies presented in this book illustrate a comprehensive, community-based approach to civic education. Two cases—Hull House and Highlander Folk School—reveal a subterranean tradition of outstanding civic education that is rooted in communities. These cases laid the philosophical and practical groundwork for a third—the Neighborhood Learning Community, a remarkably innovative contemporary example of education for democracy.

My aim is to examine the ideas and practices that define these innovations and explore how they can help us find new ways to address the educational challenges that confront us: the spread of unfettered marketplace (as opposed to democratic) values; decaying inner-city neighborhoods and schools; the loss of local culture in the age of globalization; continued widening inequalities of wealth and power; and the increasing disempowerment of ordinary citizens over the decisions that affect their lives.[10] In this context, perhaps more than ever, looking at the many institutions that educate for democracy is vital.

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Throughout our nation's history, education has been linked to the promise of democracy. Yet over the past century the connection between democracy and education has too often been confined to the classroom. While schools are struggling to achieve their academic and civic responsibilities, we are ignoring many untapped resources. This is harmful to education—it puts too much pressure on a single institution. It is also harmful to democracy—it dismisses the role of the many institutions that educate, and overlooks the potential connections between them. In short, we are failing to expand the circle to make communities real partners in educating for democracy.

When this happens, democracy becomes a consumer good or a spectator activity. At its fullest, however, democracy is more than the rule of law, freedom of the press, or a guarantee of the rights of all citizens to vote. Democracy is the work of free citizens. It involves everyday politics where ordinary people are creators, decision-makers, and actors in all aspects of their public life—from their schools and communities to workplaces and government.[11]

While a strong democracy demands active citizens to address these issues, many commentators have chronicled widespread civic disengagement in the American public and sounded the alarm about the precipitous decline in the civic health of our nation, especially among the young. Whether measured by participation in community affairs, voter turnout, trust in institutions or people, the quality of public discourse, or attention to or knowledge of public affairs, Americans appear increasingly disconnected from each other and from public life.[12]

If democratic citizens are educated, not born, as John Dewey noted, then it seems that American society is abdicating the responsibility to nurture the next generation of engaged citizens. Failure to fulfill these responsibilities now has rippling consequences for the very future of democratic practice.

School reform is essential, but schooling alone cannot do the job of educating for democracy. Looking at schooling alone fails to address the complexities and interconnections of public issues of our time. "The American tendency to equate education and schooling and make schools the instrument for satisfying our wants and alleviating our malaise takes attention from our circumstances," writes John Goodlad of the Center for Educational Renewal. "We beat on schools, leaving the contextual circumstances unaddressed."[13] Schools and communities are inexplicably linked: solutions to the problems in each must be addressed by harnessing the many talents in the "ecology of education."[14]

The first principle of ecology is that each living organism has an ongoing and continual relationship with every other element that makes up

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its environment. Thus, in our ecosystem, there is interdependence and interconnection between the many parts of the whole environment.[15]

Applying the principles of ecology to education begins with the recognition that not only do many institutions provide for educative growth, but also that the different places, people, events, and institutions that provide learning opportunities are related to one another in a potential learning web. Applying the concept of an ecology of education to educating for democracy leads us to suspect that an ecological approach is not only important for individual learning, but that interdependent and interconnected learning networks are also essential for *civic learning*.[16]

As Cynthia Gibson has argued, a more comprehensive approach to civic education acknowledges the strengths and interconnections between various approaches to civic education, including civics knowledge education, service-learning, political action and community change, and youth development.[17]

This involves shifting the center of civic learning toward the many places where the most powerful personal and civic growth takes place—the entire community. When this happens, the community becomes an essential place for learning; it ties education to civic life through collaborative public problem-solving. The institutions of any community—libraries, recreational centers, local businesses, health clinics, as well as institutions of higher education and schools—support people of all ages in the ongoing process of becoming active and democratic citizens. This shifts the focus from a scarcity model of limited resources to the creation of a civic culture with an abundance of civic resources, as Harry Boyte argues. In the simplest terms, an ecological model for civic learning connects education with civic life.[18]

## The Obstacles

There are formidable challenges to connecting education with civic life, including deteriorating schools and inner-city neighborhoods, along with declining social capital and political involvement.

### Deteriorating Schools

*A Nation at Risk* put the need for educational reform on the national agenda more than twenty years ago. In the report, the National Commission on Excellence in Education warned that schools had not kept pace with economic or social changes in society. Education, therefore, needed dramatic improvement for America to compete. The report made these claims in straightforward and explosive statements by arguing, for

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instance, that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity."[19]

The crisis of public schooling was not "discovered" in 1983, but it had an enormous influence in focusing the nation's energies on education.[20] Historian Diane Ravitch, for instance, argues that the condition of the schools was a "chronic, long-term condition rather than a 'crisis.'" *A Nation at Risk,* she said, "woke up the public and stirred a demand for change."[21] Two decades later, the need for educational improvement is taken for granted by people on all sides of the political spectrum; "better education" has become the most common response to problems ranging from preventing AIDS to reducing crime, poverty, and racism, to confronting global competition. It is also seen as a key to revitalizing American democracy.

A similar wake-up call about the state of the nation's schools was issued by Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities,* a best-selling book on the tragic conditions of America's inner-city schools. More recently, Kozol laments the lack of progress in overcoming segregated and unequal schools in *The Shame of the Nation.*[22] Kozol brought readers inside the "other America" of underfunded, racially segregated, and badly disadvantaged schools. Kozol documents the grossly unequal education of poor children in the United States by telling the stories—backed by data—of disadvantaged children with few educational opportunities.

## Deteriorating Inner-City Neighborhoods

Perhaps nothing illustrates the challenge to democracy caused by deteriorating inner-city neighborhoods more than the dramatic images shown to the nation during the tragedy and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the summer of 2005. These images illustrate the poverty, racism, and lack of jobs, adequate healthcare, or opportunity for economic advancement in urban areas across the United States. They also provide a human face to coincide with statistics that document America's urban underclass.

Much research has been done to document, understand, and change the cycle of poverty in inner-city American communities, especially since the 1960s War on Poverty. In *The Truly Disadvantaged,* William Julius Wilson writes about the corrosive effects of high-poverty, inner-city neighborhoods on the people living there. In these neighborhoods, Wilson argues, prolonged joblessness has caused a loss of the basic community institutions—including churches, schools, stores, recreation centers, and community centers. The loss of these institutions coincides with the declining sense of community, neighborhood identification, and explicit norms against aberrant behavior—which, when combined, lead to the deterioration of the social and civic organization of inner-city neighborhoods.[23]

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Wilson's later work extends to this research by further connecting the cycle of poverty with the loss of jobs in inner-city communities. Wilson argues that the problems of inner-city neighborhoods have been caused by the loss of higher paying, blue-collar jobs in the age of the global, service economy. The lack of jobs, inadequate educational institutions, and continuing racial discrimination facing people of color in inner-city neighborhoods creates a cycle of poverty as well as one of hopelessness.[24]

## Declining Social Capital

Documentation of the harsh conditions of inner-city schools and communities has played an important role in making educational reform a national priority. Unfortunately, education reform has too often been narrowly interpreted as school reform. Educational reform, therefore, has seldom been connected with the community. Yet the community is also suffering from the decline of what has been termed "social capital," defined as the social networks and relationships between citizens.

In 1966, sociologist James S. Coleman's study *Equality of Educational Opportunity,* known as "the Coleman Report," made the controversial claim that schools were far less significant than family or community in the lives of children. Coleman found that family and community resources were more important predictors of test score performance than school resources.[25]

Coleman's research builds the foundation for an ecological educational approach that acknowledges the importance of the relationships among the many institutions that educate. His research helped initiate more recent debate about the importance of social capital. Coleman documents the significance of community support and infrastructure for the healthy growth of children and found that children with greater social capital are more successful in school; those with fewer social networks are less successful. Thus, children from inner-city neighborhoods in which community institutions have deteriorated are at a severe disadvantage.[26]

Harvard Professor Robert Putnam called attention to America's declining social capital over the past forty years in his landmark 1995 article, "Bowling Alone."[27] Putnam found that Americans are not joining voluntary associations such as neighborhood clubs, PTAs, fraternal organizations, the Red Cross—or even bowling leagues—as much as they did in the past. As a result, the trust and social networks developed through these associations are declining as Americans literarily and figuratively choose to "bowl alone." In his much-anticipated book, also entitled *Bowling Alone,* Putnam warns that this decline of social networks, norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness, and groups that foster these networks, is dangerous for democracy. He argues, therefore, that civil society must be rebuilt through an increase in interactions and social connections between citizens.[28]

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Putnam's work documenting the importance of social capital to American democracy led him to study the connections between social capital and educational achievement. Putnam finds that revitalizing community life may be a *prerequisite* to revitalizing American education. His initial findings indicate, not surprisingly, that family, parent–school, within-school, and community-based social capital has a major influence on the educational process.

In examining comparative statewide educational performance in the United States, Putnam finds a strong correlation between social capital and educational performance—a connection that is even stronger than that between socioeconomic or racial characteristics and educational performance. Putnam argues that rather than blaming teachers, young people, curriculum, or the administration of schools, the actual "culprit for the educational misadventure of American youth over the past several decades may be the civic lethargy and social disengagement of American citizens."[29]

## Declining Political Involvement

The crisis for our communities cuts into the very fabric of our democracy. Along with a decrease in social capital, there is also mounting evidence of declining political involvement.[30] The National Commission on Civic Renewal, co-chaired by Sam Nunn and William Bennett, concludes:

> Too many of us have become passive and disengaged. Too many of us lack confidence in our capacity to make basic moral and civic judgments, to join with our neighbors to do the work of community, to make a difference. Never have we had so many opportunities for participation, yet rarely have we felt so powerless. . . . In a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators.[31]

In "a nation of spectators," politics is relegated to experts and political insiders and ordinary people become consumers of public life, rather than productive, engaged citizens. This trend is especially troubling for young people.

For example, the National Association of Secretaries of State's *New Millennium Project,* a study of the political attitudes of fifteen to twenty-four year olds came to the alarming conclusion that "America is in danger of developing a permanent non-voting class." Researchers found that young people lack interest, trust, and knowledge about American politics, politicians, and public life—and are generally cynical about America's future.[32]

Similarly, in *The Vanishing Voter,* Thomas Patterson noted, "Today's young adults are less politically interested and informed than any cohort

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of young people on record." On study of citizen involvement in presidential elections, Patterson concluded that the period between 1960 and 2000 marks the longest decline in turnout in the nation's history.[33] These trends have been charted by the annual survey of 250,000 college freshmen, conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles, since the mid-1960s. In the more than three decades since the initiation of the survey, every significant indicator of political engagement has fallen by at least half. In 2003, the survey reported, for example, that only 26 percent of students entering college expressed an interest in keeping up with political affairs—the lowest level reported since the survey was established in 1966. In that year, student interest in politics was reported at 58 percent.[34]

## Reclaiming Education, Community, and Democracy

Overcoming the problems of deteriorating public schools and inner-city neighborhoods, along with declining community bonds and political involvement requires new ways of thinking about the connections between reclaiming education, community, and democracy. A more expansive way of thinking about education for democracy means we must think *comprehensively*, *relationally*, and *publicly*.[35] We must rely on the myriad places where people learn and act collectively; we must emphasize bridging the connections between these formal and informal educational opportunities; and we must promote the public dimensions of education by teaching democratic skills, values, knowledge, and practices. All these ways of thinking and acting are essential for making civic learning a vital part of American education.

The need to pursue civic learning is currently being addressed by a host of initiatives. Most prominently, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, a coalition of more than forty leading organizations, chaired by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Conner and former Colorado Governor Roy Romer, is building on the *Civic Mission of Schools* report to increase the quality of civic learning in America's schools.

In higher education, a host of organizations, networks, and initiatives are attempting to renew the fundamental mission of colleges and universities as "agents of democracy." The term was used by a group of prominent college presidents in the *Presidents' Fourth of July Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education*. The July 4, 1999, declaration, which was orchestrated by Campus Compact, a national coalition of more than 1,000 colleges and universities, called on higher education to take seriously its commitment to civic learning and democratic renewal.

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Many other networks, initiatives, and practices have become part of a "civic renewal movement in higher education."[36] For example, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities has partnered with the *New York Times* on the "American Democracy Project" at 183 of its member campuses. Civic engagement, in fact, is featured in the strategic agenda of nearly every national higher education association, including the American Council on Education, the American Association of Community Colleges, the Council of Independent Colleges, and an increasing number of disciplinary associations.[37]

## Education in the Community

There are many promising models for reclaiming democracy, community, and education through "civic renewal movements." In *Civic Innovation in America,* Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland highlight innovative models in the areas of community organizing, public health care, the environment, and journalism. Lisbeth Schorr's *Common Purpose* presents comprehensive, long-term models that effectively address poverty and the growing underclass, and include lessons for scaling up and reforming public institutions. Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari, in *Building America,* find promise in the concept of "public work" and cite many hopeful historical and contemporary examples in government, nonprofits, higher education, and low-income communities. More recently, Boyte documents how the Center for Democracy and Citizenship is helping to catalyze everyday politics in neighborhoods, schools, community institutions, and institutions of higher education. Finally, Peter Levine describes the growth of a "reasonably tight and robust network" for civic renewal movement in such fields as democratic community organizing, community economic development, deliberative democracy practices, public media, service-learning, and civic education.[38]

This book focuses on the importance of community in these civic efforts. Jerome Stein, the director of the Project on Youth and Community at the University of Minnesota, contends that "education in the community" is not a fad or simply an academic curiosity; rather, "it is a new field of human endeavor."[39] This field is an essential component of educating for democracy.

Education in the community is active learning that takes place outside of, but often connected with, the classroom. It involves more than a one-time community service project; it means intentionally putting education in the context of long-term community-building efforts. It is most often place-based, using a collaborative, integrated, problem-solving approach.[40]

Education in the community represents a particular way of connecting the many places in which people learn and act collectively; it signifies

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a way of educating that calls on democratic community building practices, and it utilizes nonprofessional expertise. Like the lessons on the importance of local customs and wisdom from James Scott's study of the failure of centralized approaches, education in the community gives an "indispensable role to practical knowledge, informal processes, and improvisation in the face of unpredictability."[41] This approach, as we will see, can also help leverage the diverse ways citizens act for positive change in communities. In short, education in the community can serve as a foundation not only for meaningful learning, but also for a vibrant democracy.

It seems clear that we learn from family, friends, neighbors, and youth workers as well as teachers; that we learn in libraries, community centers, youth groups, and more informal places like hair salons, pizzerias, basketball courts, soccer fields, hip-hop circles, and neighborhood parks, as well as in schools, colleges, and universities. Within the framework of education in the community, these places of learning are not disconnected. This approach advocates partnering, for example, schools with families, neighbors with community-based organizations, and colleges and universities with religious, cultural, and business groups.

Critics have often raised questions about the lack of capacity for such collaborations. While some community institutions work to support the schools—taking on fund-raising tasks, tutoring responsibilities, or even advocating for policy changes—most existing collaborations seldom have a shared vision for success. School officials are often unaware of the goals (or activities) of families and communities, and community partners are often unaware of how their work can connect with learning outcomes.[42]

In an era of high-stakes testing in underresourced schools, there is also concern that community education efforts load additional responsibilities onto already burdened educators. This need not be the case. Education in the community recognizes the abundance of resources for learning, creating common efforts that creatively tap the many assets for civic learning. "In that way," Ira Harkavy and Marty Blank write, "schools will no longer be isolated, and entire communities can be engaged in the most vital work of a vibrant democracy: the full education of all its children."[43]

The case studies in this book reveal that intergenerational, holistic, and interconnected education that deliberately connects community learning with civic engagement is an effective strategy for civic renewal. It has been a strategy used successfully within the social settlement, social center, labor, civil rights, community schools, and service-learning movements.

## Civic Learning Models

According to Peter Levine, director of CIRCLE and a primary architect of the movement for civic renewal, civic learning might best be defined

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by the list of goals set out by *The Civic Mission of Schools* for competent and responsible citizens. These four interrelated objectives include the aims that young people

- are informed and thoughtful; have a grasp and an appreciation of history and fundamental processes of American democracy; have an understanding and awareness of public and community issues; and have the ability to obtain information, think critically, and enter into dialogue among others with different perspectives.
- participate in their communities through membership in or contributions to organizations working to address an array of cultural, social, political, and religious interests and beliefs.
- act politically by having the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes, such as group problem solving, public speaking, petitioning and protesting, and voting.
- have moral and civic virtues such as concern for the rights and welfare of others, social responsibility, tolerance and respect, and belief in the capacity to make a difference.[44]

Perhaps the most succinct definition of civic learning comes from John Saltmarsh, who writes that "civic learning is rooted in respect for community-based knowledge, grounded in experiential and reflective modes of teaching and learning, aimed at active participation in American democracy, and aligned with institutional change efforts to improve student learning."[45]

Developing civic pathways to increase these values, skills, knowledge, and practices is the work of many policy makers, educators, and foundations, as evidenced by initiatives to increase civic engagement among our nation's youth. The models of civic learning presented in this book are part of an effort to create new ideas, metaphors, and practices for approaches to education. As Theodore Sizer writes:

> The traditional ways of perceiving adolescents' learning must be held in check, the governing metaphors and familiar practices diligently challenged, and no idea peremptorily dismissed because of its presumed impracticality or perceived ideological roots; all must be addressed at once.[46]

This approach distinguishes between school-centered learning, the traditional model in which the school is the central hub for education, and education that recognizes the many places where people learn and their connections to each other, termed "education in the community." It represents the shifting center of gravity that takes place when community and community institutions are essential pieces in the educational system (see Figure 1.1).

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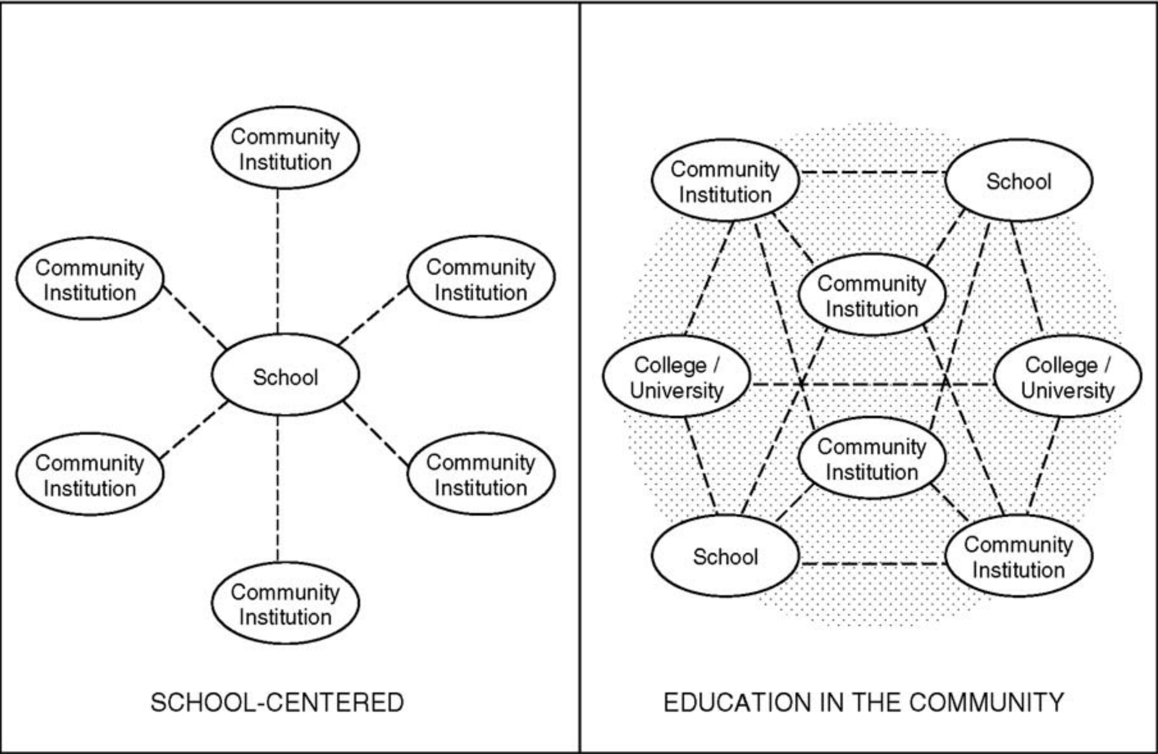
**Figure 1.1** Approaches to Education: Schooling and the Community

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Considerable research has been conducted on various conceptions of civic engagement.[47] In the most extensive cross-generational study, a research team funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts organizes the many ways that people are involved in public life into nineteen indicators that fit into three broad categories: civic activities, electoral activities, and political voice. The survey that led to *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation* measures civic activities in three ways: by organized volunteer activity focused on solving problems and helping others; by electoral activities such as voting and election-related work; and by political voice—activities that people engage in to give expression to their political and social viewpoints.[48]

I define civic engagement as *public work* (projects creating things of public value); *community involvement* (membership in community groups and community service); *community organizing* (canvassing, protesting, and building power relations); *civic knowledge* (awareness of government processes and following public affairs); *conventional political action* (voting, campaign work, and advocacy for legislation); and *public dialogue* (deliberative conversations on public issues). These overlapping and interconnected civic practices are depicted in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.3 represents the approaches to educating for democracy revealed in the studies presented in this book, with models that connect education in the community and civic engagement. As Figure 1.3 illustrates, not all education in the community connects with civic engagement. For example, learning in sports, summer camps, and even many collaborative projects between schools and communities provides educative growth, but these are not necessarily examples of public work, community organizing, public dialogue, civic knowledge, conventional political action, or even community involvement.

At the same time, many examples of civic engagement have no connection to education in the community. For instance, classroom-based social studies can provide civic knowledge, a letter writing campaign to a local official is a good example of conventional political action, and young people on a debate team participate in public dialogues, but none of these activities necessarily involves learning in the context of the broader community.

Deliberate, holistic, integrated, and public approaches to learning-in-action are features of the model of education for democracy in this book. Hull House, Highlander Folk School, and the Neighborhood Learning Community are important and powerful cases because each employs a broader ecology of civic learning. This model serves as the foundation for a new way to think about civic education.

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**Figure 1.2** Civic Engagement

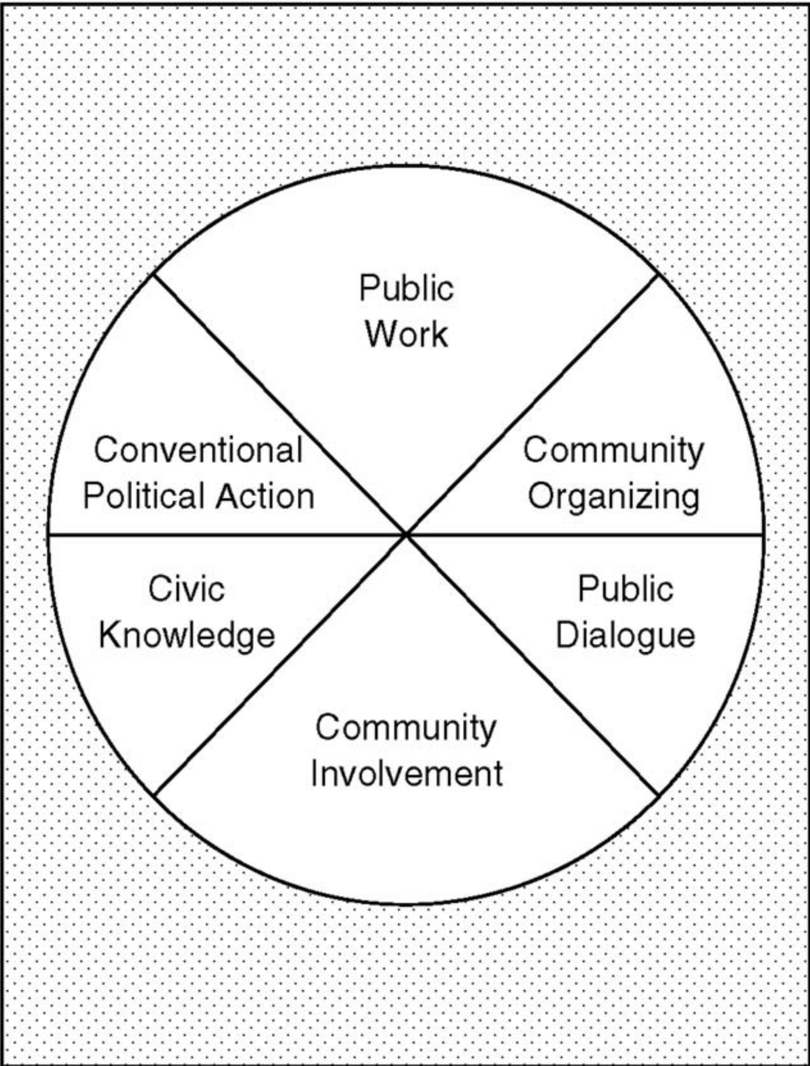


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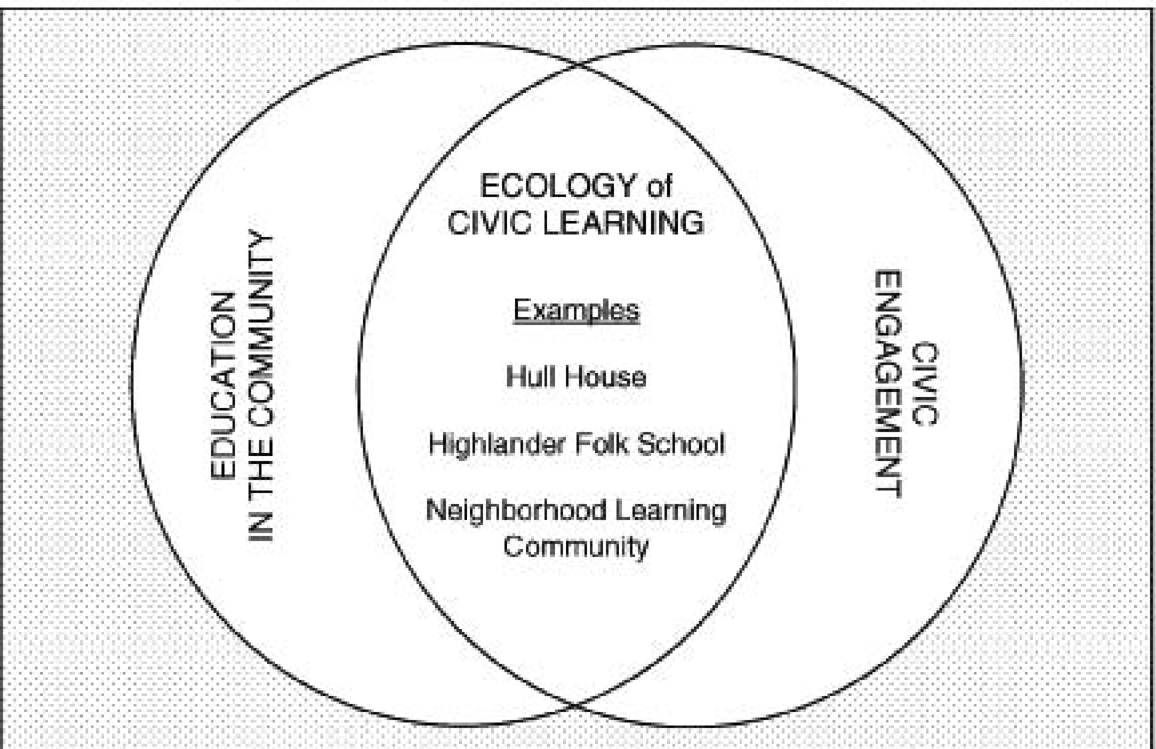
**Figure 1.3** The Ecology of Civic Learning

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## A Different Kind of Politics

The ecological approach to civic learning suggests that community engagement is an essential pathway for civic renewal. Of course, like schooling, the community alone is no panacea. Nevertheless, many opportunities exist to bring us back into educative balance by focusing on community assets, working toward public outcomes, and making education a more expansive endeavor. Addressing these issues is essential to rethinking civic education. The ecological approach also represents the framework within which we can educate for a different type of politics—one that moves us beyond the narrow interests of a scarcity model.

Research on youth organizations in the community seems to support the role of community revitalization in political revitalization. Stanford professor Milbrey McLaughlin connects community-based learning with positive outcomes for youth. In *Community Counts,* McLaughlin finds that focusing on community is a proven strategy for the personal, social, and civic growth of young people. McLaughlin's study, sponsored by the Spencer Foundation, reports that community-based organizations can make a powerful and positive contribution to the lives of young people. In these organizations, young people engage in positive activities, build caring relationships, gain self-confidence, and develop ambitious career aspirations. Influenced by their involvement in the community, these young people gain essential civic characteristics, as they "intend to be assets to their communities and examples for others to follow."[49] Perhaps more important, young people involved in community organizations have a higher rate of civic engagement and a greater commitment to getting involved.

While researchers are finding a decline in political and civic involvement, there is surging interest in, and opportunities for, community involvement by young people in community service and service-learning.[50] For instance, according to the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), an all-time high of 83.2 percent of the freshman entering class of 2005 report that they volunteered at least occasionally during their senior year in high school, and 70.6 percent report that they typically volunteered on a weekly basis.[51]

Although these activities have been of significant interest to scholars and policy makers interested in the health of American democracy, many have since found that community service has limitations for increasing political engagement. Community service, they argue, is based on apolitical notions of volunteerism wherein too few efforts are made to link involvement in community with notions of power.[52] Students therefore tend to believe that engagement with the political process is unimportant and irrelevant for change and that community service is a more

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effective way to solve public problems. They often see community service as an *alternative to* politics.

Many critics observe that an emphasis on "serving needs" illustrates an approach in which people with privilege or professional expertise act as "charitable helpers," not reciprocal partners in community renewal. This disempowering approach often hides the power issues among volunteers, nonprofit professionals, and the people they "serve." One of the most vocal critics of this approach, John McKnight, points out the role community service plays in creating an industry of professionals whose very jobs rely on the continued existence of community deficiencies—and who tend to see people they serve in terms of their deficits, rather than their assets.[53]

Service can also fail to recognize the nature of politics and power. Harry Boyte contends that service routinely "neglects to teach about root causes and power relationships, fails to stress productive impact, ignores politics, and downplays the strengths and talents of those being served." Boyte also points out that service "does not teach the political skills that are needed to work effectively toward solving society's problems: public judgment, the collaborative exercise of power, conflict resolution, negotiating, bargaining, and holding others accountable."[54]

And while it was assumed that service-learning programs would lead to greater political participation, the evidence for this is unclear.[55] David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, one of the leading voices for democratic renewal writes, "Service programs, although filled with political implications that bright students are likely to recognize, tend to be kept carefully distanced from political education." It is, therefore, "difficult to say what effect, if any, these service programs have on civic education."[56]

And yet, there is a growing movement among young people in the public work tradition, which begins to define a different kind of politics that enables students to find participatory, inclusive, open, creative, and deliberative ways of addressing public problems. For instance, in 2001, thirty-three college students met at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin, to discuss their "civic experiences" in higher education.

This conversation led to the student-written *New Student Politics,* which forcefully argues that student work in communities is not an alternative to politics, but rather an "alternative politics." The students at Wingspread noted that they see democracy as richly participatory; that negotiating differences is a key element of politics; that their service in communities was done in the context of systemic change; and that higher education needs to do more to promote civic education.[57]

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Furthermore, the students proclaimed, "We see ourselves as misunderstood by those who measure student engagement by conventional standards that don't always fit our conceptions of democratic participation." *The New Student Politics* concludes by quoting E. J. Dionne's analysis that "the great reforming generations are the ones that marry the aspirations of service to the possibilities of politics and harness the good work done in local communities to transform a nation." The students, it seems, are part of a long tradition of younger generations casting a new civic identity and new way of thinking and acting for the public good.[58]

This "new student politics," writes Harry Boyte, is a "sign that today's students in American colleges and universities are beginning to think and act politically, as organizers for change."[59] A series of public declarations and national campaigns on college campuses further illustrate this. Following up on the Wingspread Conference, for example, Campus Compact launched a national campaign aimed at involving college students in public life, called *Raise Your Voice*. Since 2002, students on more than 300 college campuses have been involved in mapping civic assets on campuses, hosting dialogues on public issues on campuses and in communities, and organizing for social change.[60]

The insights derived from these innovative efforts have made for good scholarship and ring true to professionals in the field, and, more important, to ordinary citizens. Unfortunately, they have had little impact on education policy. Stifled by the technocratic impulse that narrows democratic possibilities, education policy is still school-based and expert driven. The prominent educator and champion of small schools, Theodore Sizer, acknowledged this lack of public impact in his memoir, *The Red Pencil*.

Sizer recognizes the potential for the ecology of education on educational policy. Drawing on his fifty years of experience in education and on lessons learned from his former teacher, Lawrence Cremin, Sizer writes, "Educators should accept Cremin's challenge and move toward the design of modern ways to educate youth—a very rethinking of deliberate education, rethinking that includes, but goes substantially beyond, the good things that can happen in the familiar building."[61]

The cacophony of voices calling for new ways of thinking comes from those outside of the field of education as well. For instance, organizational system-thinker Peter Senge says in *Community Youth Development Journal*, "Until we go back to thinking about school as the totality of the environment in which a child grows up, we can expect no deep changes. Change requires a community—people living and working together, assuming some common responsibility for something that's of deep concern and interest to all of them, their children."[62]

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These observations are just as salient for civic education. But change will not occur because "it is the right thing to do." As I contend in the conclusion of this book, it requires a different kind of politics. Similarly, Harry Boyte argues, "We need bold, savvy, and above all *political* citizens and civic institutions if we are to tame a technological, manipulative state, to transform an increasingly materialistic and competitive culture, and to address effectively the mounting practical challenges of a turbulent and interconnected world."[63]

One strategy for implementing the ecology of civic learning is simply telling the stories that run counter to the dominant narrative. In this book, I attempt to make a small contribution toward this effort.

## Overview

In chapter two, John Dewey's speech on "The School as a Social Centre" serves as an anchor for a review of the history and practices of "education writ large." This chapter identifies significant historical developments for education in the community, including social centers, community schools, and engaged colleges and universities. I also introduce innovative ideas and practices, and the significant people, such as Leonard Covello, Elsie Clapp, and Ernest Boyer, who pioneered these movements.

The next three chapters present the case studies: Hull House, Highlander Folk School, and the Neighborhood Learning Community. In the Hull House case study in chapter three, I examine the efforts of Jane Addams and her experiment with democracy in an urban, immigrant neighborhood at the turn of the twentieth century. Though she never used the language of "civic learning," Jane Addams serves as one of its earliest advocates and practitioners. In this chapter, I consider the influences, people, and ideas that shaped the Hull House programs and educational approach. I also explore the Labor Museum, Hull House's intergenerational democratic experiment in which new immigrants attempted to use education as a force for social and political change.

In chapter four I examine the democratic education practiced by Myles Horton, Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson, and others at Highlander Folk School, along with how this effort was partially inspired by Jane Addams and Hull House. I explore Highlander's founding, educational philosophy, and practices, and detail the most successful civic learning program implemented by Highlander: the Citizenship Schools, which emerged as key civic educational projects during the civil rights movement of the 1950 and 1960s.

In chapter five I examine a contemporary case study, the Neighborhood Learning Community in St. Paul, Minnesota. The Neighborhood

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Learning Community builds upon the lessons of Hull House and Highlander, but also gives new meaning to the ecology of civic learning through its efforts to connect multiple institutions in a learning network in an urban community. This case study illustrates the power of community-based initiatives and public practices as well as the importance of establishing an intentional educational network whose job is to connect education in the community with civic engagement. The chapter concludes with obstacles to and successful examples of school–community collaborations.

Chapter six includes an examination of the democratic habits of community practitioners, including "thinking-in-action," connecting diverse communities, and using informal education. The chapter also describes essential democratic skills and tools, such as community asset mapping, community power mapping, and "being local," for promoting civic education.

The key lessons learned from analysis of the case studies in this book are outlined in chapter seven. The chapter concludes with policy recommendations, the rationales for change, and a road map for future explorations of civic education.

Readers who are concerned by current trends toward civic disengagement, especially among the young, and a lack of ideas about how education can play a role in civic renewal will find much to be hopeful about in the pages that follow. It is not my intention to provide the whole story—or the last word—on the ecology of civic learning. That is overly ambitious. What I set out to do is introduce new ways of thinking about civic education and to describe imaginative educational practices that will shift the center of education, open up new possibilities, and widen the conversation on the connections among education, community, and democracy.

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