In this thought-provoking book, Kathleen Knight Abowitz aims to offer a renewed conception of the public in public schooling, hoping to breathe new life and commitment into our schools and communities. The book’s structure is arranged around three elements that support her endeavor to reinvigorate publics and their support for public schools: legitimacy, public life, and public leadership. As she connects each element to defining “public” and public schools, she reconstructs each notion, providing an enhanced version of each that is grounded in today’s educational context and ready to be applied there. Knight Abowitz urges us to refocus on the local, not as a romanticized ideal of the past, but rather as a site where we experience messy education-related problems that intimately impact us, and where we can work collaboratively to construct solutions, ultimately coming together to form a public will for our schools. This call is timely in light of increasing pressures toward centralized control of schooling and privatization, both of which work against local participatory political engagement in our public schools. She persuasively goads us to envision creative alternatives to these pressures and offers us helpful guidance in how to do so.

Defining Publics

Even though Knight Abowitz says she is not asking what a public school is, the centrality of “public” to her title and overall project means that she must spend substantial time explaining what she means by public, publics, and public schools. Indeed, it is her intriguing account of “public” and its applications that is the greatest contribution of her book. She sets the stage by explaining how “public” has come to be seen by many as a negative description, causing some districts to adopt the language and approaches of the private sphere instead. Moreover, she demonstrates how efforts to make public schools truly accessible for all students led to some of the bureaucracy that has made many people frustrated with public ventures today, thereby exposing a troublesome turn of events that partially explains increasing support for privatization in education. She locates another move toward privatization in the drive for economic competitiveness, noting that public schooling, in contrast, “would never ignore economic aims of education,
but would promote equally important civic and social aims as well, and would do so in a manner that was consistent with principles of collective self-governance, of public scrutiny and participation, and of liberty and equality, promised by our Constitution” (PS, 13).

She ushers the reader past relatively unhelpful descriptions of public schools that merely note how they are funded and run, focusing instead on how public schools might best function. It is in this move and by way of the work of educational organizer Dennis Shirley that Knight Abowitz introduces us to “public” as a verb — an achievement. This provocative description offers a thoroughly different take on public life as a lived struggle with others, leading to calls for action. Knight Abowitz shows how public does not exist as a ready-made entity, but rather as a way of life that citizens construct. In this sense, she rightly points out that public functions both as a description of the real and flawed ways groups act, and as a normative and political ideal of how groups of people might better function. She also clarifies that Public is often used in the singular, expressing the collective, unitary group united as a symbol of universal citizenship, but adds that public more often exists as a multitude, where publics are groups of people who come together around shared problems and deliberate together about how to address them. The groups tend to be ephemeral, depending on the issue that unites them and other factors.

Knight Abowitz also helpfully distinguishes inadequate metaphors often used to conceive of the public, thereby providing additional conceptual clarification through problematic foils. I appreciate that she delineates what publics are not because the voyeuristic, passive, and consumerist metaphors of public life that she dissect are rampant, and they jeopardize healthy democracy when they are uncritically echoed by citizens and adopted by leaders. Finally, she clarifies why some gaps between publics and public schooling currently exist, including the heavy influence of business interests in shaping education policy, the lack of citizen participation in school governance, and the disdain among some educational leaders regarding this sort of citizen involvement.

The title of one of her chapters summarizes her definition of publics well: “Publics: Formed of Problems, Existing in Conflict, Developing in Deliberation” (PS, chap. 4). Knight Abowitz recognizes that few publics achieve the type of maturity sought by John Dewey in The Public and Its Problems, or continue the type of ongoing public work necessary for building and sustaining publics sought by David Matthews and others writing on participatory democracy at the Kettering Foundation. She addresses the formation, ongoing conflict, and development of publics in order to provide insight into how to make fleeting publics stronger and how to nurture more mature publics through ongoing communication, empowerment, and collaborative solution building. In particular, she points toward ways in which mature publics, facilitated by good leadership, can be sustained through deliberations that construct common viewpoints and mutually agreed upon solutions.

Knight Abowitz provides examples of ways that schools can achieve publics, including how they can be supported and nurtured by community, collaborations,
quality deliberation, and good leaders. But more significantly, she shows how to achieve publics for public schools — publics that support and constitute our schools, their goals, and the will behind them. One aid in creating these publics includes community organizing, a process that may foster political agency as members work toward realizing their goals. In her discussion of community organizing, she highlights several rich examples and draws upon the work of Dennis Shirley and Aaron Schutz.

I especially appreciate how — again, in Deweyan fashion — Knight Abowitz highlights the habits and skills that support and enact her publics, including “communication, building power, leadership development, and collaborative creation” (PS, 93). As habits, they are proclivities and dispositions. They are deeply ingrained in one’s way of life and daily practices. She spends the most time describing habits of communication, providing a transactive account of communication and a holistic view of how it engages the mind, body, emotion, and environment. For Knight Abowitz, communication underlies nearly every approach to public creation and achievement that she advocates.

Her definition of “public” has important connections to the everyday politics advocated by Harry Boyte, which entails “negotiation and collaboration that is more concerned with solving problems and creating public goods than with placing blame. This different kind of politics is rooted in local cultures, not only places but also cultures of institutions where people encounter each other on a regular, face-to-face basis.” Additionally, whereas references to public schools often evoke affiliations with the government, Knight Abowitz locates publics not within the government, but within civil society. This politicized space is not entirely distinct, however, for it is interconnected with markets, the state, and private individuals. Here again she seems to be aligned with Boyte’s call for seeing “public” as an element of the civic, where “it weds concrete self-interests to constructive work that contributes to the life of communities and the well-being of the society. This civic aspect means understanding politics not only in distributive terms, as a fight over scarce resources — who gets what — but in productive terms as well, about problem solving and culture-creating.”

Knight Abowitz claims to offer her notion of public as a “guiding orientation for those working in and with public schools” (PS, 44). I appreciate her efforts to engage in the conceptual clarification of philosophy with the explicit aim of developing a term that can be put to work in the service of school leadership and renewal. She says, “my hope for this book about the public of public schools is that the term public, as a result of this exploration, acquires more meaning and thus becomes better able to guide practice in local contexts by educational leaders” (PS, xi). She has certainly been successful in offering new and enhanced meaning to “public,” and if the book falls into the hands of an educational leader who is willing to entertain educational theory, I am hopeful that she will be successful in the second part of her goal as well. Knight Abowitz, admittedly writing as a theorist of education and shying away from the minutiae of application details, sees her work as informed by and contributing to the field of philosophy of education, which is
surely the case. But perhaps the more suitable audience for her work is actually those educational leaders who could move from theory to application, putting her suggestions to work in improving schools and public life.

Importantly, Knight Abowitz does not put forward an overly optimistic vision of “public,” but rather aims for a realistic conception of public that is both suitable for our nonideal world and a step toward improving the education system. Here we see the Deweyan influence of reconstructionism that runs throughout her work, as she moves through reworking the three related notions of legitimacy, public life, and public leadership with one eye on the complexities of real life today and the other on meliorism and improved ends-in-view.

Supporting Publics with Legitimacy, Public Life, and Public Leadership

Achieving publics and employing them to support and be active in public schools first requires establishing the legitimacy of schools as public institutions. Legitimacy is an issue that is too rarely explicitly discussed and yet underlies much of the current climate of attacks on public schools and punitive accountability movements. Intriguingly, Knight Abowitz endorses William Lowe Boyd’s declaration that we are facing a “legitimacy crisis” (PS, 20).6 She responds by setting out to reconstruct the term, helpfully revealing along the way that legitimacy is not merely a marketing or a branding issue, though many educational administrators cast it as such when looking for a quick fix. She begins with two criteria for legitimacy put forward by Kenneth Strike: meeting the aims of the public and doing so using the conditions of liberal democracy (PS, 20). She then seems to march through explicating at length each of the five principles for legitimacy that Strike lists elsewhere (PS, chap. 2).7 But she goes beyond these criteria and principles, as well as traditional Lockean notions of giving one’s consent to a government-run organization.8 While not made explicit in her introduction to the principles, we see, in reading carefully, that her explanations of each principle rest on her conception of legitimacy as actively occurring when the public feels that their interests are being met through the aims of the school, which they help shape and guide through participating in shared governance. With each principle addressed, she shows the reader some of the ways in which schools have fallen short of achieving legitimacy in the past and points toward ways to improve legitimacy in the future, using the more active sense of public as achievement. She brings these notions together when she says, “Public schools are at their most public, in this sense, when they are morally and politically legitimate” (PS, 14).

Turning from her first related concept of legitimacy to her second of public life, Knight Abowitz takes a look at deliberative democracy approaches aligned with the work of Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, as well as more applied cases of deliberation in schools. She articulates the role of educational leaders in organizing, participating in, and acting upon the decisions reached through deliberation. She rightly proclaims that deliberative democracy can improve legitimacy by fostering greater participation and some overlapping consensus on the purpose of local schools. And while I would have liked to hear her say more about this issue, she echoes Boyte in her brief assertion that deliberative democracy fosters viewing
Schools as in a process of governance rather than government-run, thereby adding to her enhanced notion of public schools as more than just government-run.

Moving on to her final component, public leadership, Knight Abowitz invites coauthor Steven Thompson to join her as they turn their attention to leadership for public schools (see PS, chap 7). Their discussion helped me appreciate the role of educational leaders in achieving truly public schools in a new way, as I often overlooked them or focused merely on their more managerial roles. Instead, educational leaders should be achieving publics alongside those in their communities, guiding them through understanding and making difficult choices regarding local problems, struggling with them in this process, and then enacting solutions that are mutually constructed.

While this point is not addressed explicitly, their account of educational leaders is aligned with a post-statist conception of democratic governance, where governance is not merely done by elected officials or appointed school administrators, but rather results from the collaborative work of leaders, civil society associations, and citizens. It is no surprise, then, that they offer a rather broad definition of educational leaders, including both formal and informal leaders in schools as well as in the civic organizations that intersect with them in solving school-related problems. Moreover, they define educational leaders broadly so as to capture the sense of leadership as practicing habits of social intelligence, trust, group identity building, and collaboration, rather than as describing a status or position. This practice differs considerably from visions of managerial technique that many people hold.

The lone coauthored chapter, however, likely due to the appearance of another author, does mark a sudden shift in writing style, with lists of references, grand statements about history, and a lack of clear focus for how those claims or references are pertinent to the chapter’s central concern of leadership. Nonetheless, this chapter does bring to fruition the distinctive “bifocal” view of public life that Knight Abowitz has been advancing throughout the book. Here Thompson and Knight Abowitz demonstrate how focusing on both the unitary Public and the local publics can offer leaders a better approach to governance that invites participation while balancing local control with constitutional principles of equity and democracy. This description of and vision for leadership is the second most significant contribution of the book.

A Few Shortcomings

While Knight Abowitz presents a largely compelling and well-argued case, there are a few areas in which she leaves ground uncovered. For instance, she falls short in her discussion of legitimacy in three regards. First, her conception of legitimacy is limited by her own participatory democracy framework, where she celebrates community, the common good, and consensus construction through participatory decision making. While her vision of legitimacy fits squarely within this framework, it is not fully reconcilable with a dominant competing framework of liberal democracy, which heralds equal opportunity as a key criterion of legitimacy insofar as it enables individuals to pursue their own notion of the good life without necessarily establishing connections to a community or a concern
for the common good. I sense that she has the conceptual chops to bridge this divide, but she does not do so here. Second, she is not successful in explaining how legitimacy is a cultural and political good for public school, as she says she intends to do. Yes, legitimacy is a good thing insofar as it signifies the support of the public in its institution and the justice of that arrangement. In this way, legitimacy might seem to some to be more of a goal or perhaps even a necessity in a flourishing democracy. Still, despite using the phrasing repeatedly, she leaves the reader wondering just how legitimacy is “a good for public schools” (PS, 21, emphasis added). Delivering a fuller account of this phrase would better explain how public schools themselves can become stronger when legitimacy is achieved and maintained, thereby rendering her overall project more convincing and further differentiating it from legitimacy as some status that can seemingly be denoted with a checkmark by those in power. Third, Knight Abowitz’s account of legitimacy and its present precarious position would be more complete if she were to look more closely at the role political identity plays in influencing legitimacy. I would add, following Jürgen Habermas, that legitimacy may also be at risk due to the shifting nature of identity in America recently, where the legitimacy of the state and its institutions is reflected in their ability to preserve shared identity while adapting to changes in that identity and related norms and values, which may take place in schools.9

I also found myself wanting to hear more about the relationships she draws between schools and publics. For Knight Abowitz, schools are accountable to both the singular Public and the multiple publics. Indeed, she highlights how emphasizing the public of public schools reveals a political and ethical relationship where schools are responsive to the citizens that compose its publics. I found myself wondering whether this relationship, as an ethical one based on some type of duty or perhaps a type of care for the well-being of the other party, implies any sort of reciprocal responsiveness on the part of the public to the schools? In other words, must citizens take action in support of their schools or the shared problems of their community? Should they even care, at minimum? Additionally, as a political relationship, how is power being funneled in multiple directions when schools are responsive to citizens, if this is occurring at all? Knight Abowitz seems to sidestep this last question when she overtly defines the political not as “the narrowly self-interested pursuit of power and influence,” but rather as a form of collective decision making serving a wide range of interests (PS, 47). Nonetheless, power is still at play here and should be addressed, even if the interests are widened and the group is broad.

What her definition of the political does provide, however, is a segue into showing how publics arise from political activities concerned with influencing schools, activities that often entail conflicting ideologies and yet bring people together to work on shared issues or problems. Her definition of the political within this schooling context, then, calls for certain types of community action by educational leaders, with explicit attention focused on facilitating the conflicting educational interests of individuals and publics. Additionally, while Knight Abowitz notes several potential benefits from community organizing, including empowering the
disenfranchised and looking out for the interests of poor families in schools, I am not fully convinced that schools have more ongoing legitimacy or accountability because of organizing, insofar as it often leads to limited or short-term changes. To make this case, she must provide more evidence. Admittedly, though, her description of bolstering publics and supporting them toward maturity may also be applied to the community organizing approach she recommends.

Another area that is underdeveloped, but may suggest potential new directions for research and theorization, is Knight Abowitz’s account of the habits of publics, which she largely confines to habits of communication. While she does not describe them as such, her call for publics for public schools via deliberation would be strengthened by employing the Deweyan perspective that habits constitute the will to act, where habits provide the mechanisms that not only enable us to reason, but also to carry out the activities that result from that reasoning. Another democratic habit that Knight Abowitz does not describe, but that would complement her project, is viewing citizenship as shared fate. This habit, supported by Sigal Ben-Porath, Melissa Williams, and myself, is an inclination to interpret events in terms of their impact on the “us” that composes a public, including a concern for others and social responsibility. While she only briefly hints at how we might prepare citizens for the publics for public schools that she promotes, I sense that an education that cultivates the habits of publicness and communication that she delineates would be the key to doing so, suggesting possible follow-up work in aspects of civic education for her or others in the field.

Finally, Knight Abowitz falls short in her discussion of deliberative democracy and ways of public life. She attempts to head off criticisms that the associative democracy she champions as a participatory democrat is too idealistic, difficult to achieve, and perhaps not even desirable given that the public may not always be trusted to make decisions, nor can they do so effectively when their differences are too divisive. Though I found her arguments to be persuasive, they were too brief and likely not convincing enough to persuade those who hold those competing views. She offers another unsatisfying response when she replies to the fear some leaders have of the possible substantial controversy that deliberation may provoke by saying that it’s better to take on that controversy than to do nothing at all to change school governance. Her response delegitimize very real problems that may be exacerbated through deliberation simply by proclaiming that not talking about those issues is the lesser of two evils. Of course, some of the fear held by leaders may be an unwarranted result of the consensus ideology Michael Apple argues is guiding “safe” conversations in schools, but there is a real possibility of inciting deep community division or even violence that Knight Abowitz should not be so quick to dismiss.

The concerns I have raised should not be read as an indictment of this book; actually, the case is quite the opposite. Instead, these concerns are marks of lingering questions, thirst for continued explanation, and desire to further contemplate the intriguing ideas Knight Abowitz has put forth. Indeed, this is one of the best books I have read in some time, and Knight Abowitz has risen to the
top of my list of theorists whose views I find not only interesting, but also with the greatest potential to significantly reshape and reclaim public education. This book bravely enters into the fray of attacks on our public schools and brings together legitimacy, public life via deliberation, and public leadership as a pathway forward. Rather than throwing in the towel on public education or merely issuing esoteric calls to preserve public schools, Knight Abowitz provides not only a call to action insofar as she urges us to form publics for public schools, but provides us with the concepts and the tools we need to cultivate our habits of publicness and engage in such work effectively.

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1. Kathleen Knight Abowitz’s Publics for Public Schools: Legitimacy, Democracy, and Leadership will be cited in the text as PS.
5. Ibid., 4–5.